

EVOLUTION OF A FILMMAKER

by

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture on May 7, 1980, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Visual Studies.

Abstract

Personal filmmaking now has the potential of recording a significant part of the artist's life in greater intimacy than ever before through the use of light-weight, portable, single system super-8 cameras, transferred and edited on 3/4" videocassette. The future viability of film on videodisc will lead to low cost productions and larger distribution of the artist's work.

Thesis Supervisor: Edward Pincus

Title: Adjunct Professor of Cinema

27 min section on 30 min. tape.
with sound - in English
with color

My thesis film research is a departure from conventional cinema verite productions. It is the beginning of a life-long venture that has already had enormous impact on my life. Due to the fact that very little research has been conducted by artists in the relatively new field of single system super-8 filmmaking (with transfer to 3/4" video cassette for editing and viewing), any serious aficionado of this developing medium becomes an instant expert of a novice sort. This paper will deal with the results of my work and observations over the past four years as both a student and teacher, as an ethnographic as well as personal filmmaker, and as an artist experimenting with visual mobility. I will also discuss the future viability of the videodisc as it applies to my personal brand of cinematography. It is my thesis that my choice of media (single system super-8 film to video transfer) relates comparatively in quality with any competing professional medium, either 16mm or video production, and the advantages of such a system.

A person can now travel through life filming the world about him and his place within the order of things while producing works of art at a reasonable cost. This amazing possibility has in it the makings of an entirely new form of cinemagraphic expression: the most highly personal recording of a significant part of one's life--an exercise that I began in earnest in 1976 when I took along my first sync sound super-8 camera to record my lengthy stay on a few coral atolls of the South Pacific. I foresee building a multi-dimensional visual impression of one's years, within a budget that any serious artist of little means can afford and most

importantly, utilizing media that can take this personal account to an audience of far larger proportions than see film in conventional theatres nowadays. In the same way a writer's message is translated into libraries and living rooms around the world, so too can an artist's vision be transported to the home market worldwide (via video cassette and videodisc). A revolution has begun in the cinema, opening the visual media to a greater intimacy and availability than has existed heretofore.

Historically, film has tended to recreate life's happenings in dramatic ways. Even cinema verite filmmakers have only been able to capture bits and pieces of life's anxieties. Already I have begun anticipating those anxieties through daily infusions of celluloid imagery. Ed Pincus has shown that it is possible to capture a large chunk of one's years in his Diary film (1980). His monumental work raises the question: "Is it life, or is it movie?" Can a personal filmmaker reach the point of no return when he commits his life to the recording of that life? An intriguing idea, although audiences at the box office might not agree. Yet if Pincus could successfully film a five year span, can I continue to film until my dissolution? Can cinemagraphic art now encompass every moment of one human's life--from birth to death? If it can be accomplished, it might best be done with the portable, self-contained, and light-weight features of single system super-8. Let me explain in practical terms.

There is no more mobile equipment available than the single system sound super-8 cameras. That is a fact. Such cameras can weigh as little as a few pounds. Any 16mm camera with sound recording equipment weighs significantly more. The video camera may appear as compact as the super-8 setup, but one is tied by cables to heavy production equipment and batteries.

Even the innovative double system super-8 rigs developed at MIT in the early '70s cannot compare to the mobility and flexibility of today's single system cameras--especially on single person shoots. Anywhere a person can go, the camera leads his way. Greater intimacy in film is the result because the camera is simply an extension of the artist and not vice versa.

There is no more economical piece of equipment. With prices of super-8 sync cameras beginning at a couple of hundred dollars (with top market prices of a couple of thousands for state-of-the-art), no comparable video or 16mm equipment can be had. That is fact. For the first time, sync sound filmmaking is available to virtually anybody.

For the price, the image quality of super-8 lenses cannot be beat. While I accept this statement as fact, I understand that my assertion is relative to the eye of the individual beholder. But for purposes of discussion, if we accept television broadcast quality to be one standard for measurement of excellence, then super-8 competes well. My ethnographic films of the Pacific (my first amateurish effort) have been shown on some of Boston's television outlets--and the camera I used was a relatively cheap Sankyo that cost about \$200 in 1976. There were no grumblings from the stations' video technicians, although it was filmed at 18 frames per second (video is 30 frames) and it was shot with the automatic exposure control. The national news media have begun to utilize super-8 film footage for broadcast. The vivid images of the first moments of the embassy takeover in Tehran and the blindfolded American hostages, repeatedly shown on the networks, were filmed entirely by Iranians with hand-held

super-8 cameras. This is not to say that a Hollywood production crew could not have filmed a sharper image; but since no such team was on the spot, and super-8 was, it can be asserted that super-8 meets standards of broadcast quality and accessibility not easily matched by less mobile, highly technical, and more expensive equipment. As long as the batteries are okay, the image is instantaneous. Single-system super-8 will be on location filming events before the other formats have unloaded their equipment.

Super-8 film has almost everything--except legitimacy in professional media circles. As a result, technical improvements tended to lag behind the research developed for other media formats, due to the "amateur market" mentality of the film industrialists. Yet when Kodak first introduced its super-8 format, it was aware of these problems:

. . . Super-8 will not compete with, but complement 35mm and 16mm in serving a distinct set of human needs that are becoming increasingly evident everyday. Therefore, it must be encouraged to develop according to its own unique characteristics, rather than within the framework of these older, different film systems. In other words, we have to avoid the mistake of applying existing thinking--the way 35mm thinking was applied to 16mm back in the '30s.¹

At first super-8 seemed destined to wind up with the hand-me-downs of the trade. However, the recent introduction of tiny integrated circuitry (chips) has provided for some amazing technological gimmickry that now allows the artist options in his filming that before were only available in processing labs. Super-8, the professional filmmaker's pariah, has continued to expand at a phenomenal rate since its introduction a decade ago. Any professional prejudice against super-8 as a worthy competitor can be dis-

missed simply for what it is: a prejudice.

A large part of the responsibility to change the image of the super-8 format rests with the artists who pursue careers within the medium. A finely-executed scene shot in single system super-8 and transferred to video for broadcast cannot be seriously challenged as inferior to 16mm film likewise transferred.² And it is being demonstrated that such professional prejudice is discredited in projection, as well, by the recent experience of Ricky Leacock's low budget (less than \$200) "Visit to David," a single system super-8 production. It was shown to an incredulous audience at a large Parisian moviehouse in April 1980. Prejudices may die slow deaths, but ones that argue against super-8 are quickly committing suicide.

But a defense of the super-8 format is not necessary in this thesis. Concrete examples of its superiority as a tool of the artist are important, especially as experienced through personal observation.

My film demonstrates a personal evolution of my camera technique. The original reason I chose to work in single system super-8 was an economic one (as it will be the economics of the 1980s that will encourage the expansion of the super-8 market). It is just not affordable today for a poor film student, who desires to be an independent filmmaker, to become artistically proficient with a 16mm movie camera through hands-on use. Film stock and developing have become so expensive that film schools which teach in 16mm are in danger of becoming preserves of only the independently wealthy--a sad trend for those interested in artistic creativity and academic research.

"I did a 16mm film the orthodox way, having a print made and all that," Leacock goes on to say, "and all the out-of-pocket cost, never mind the equipment, for a 12-minute film was \$2,000, and that's very cheap. I'm not counting a lot of things like transportation and all that. I made a super-8 film, doing it the way I just described, and it cost me about \$70, maybe \$100. Now I sometimes find my way to blowing \$100, but \$2,000, that's way out for me."³

Of course, there is the possibility of hustling hard for grants.⁴

But while you wait, your camera eye is idle, and no serious camera person can improve personal technique and artistic skills through inactivity.

I have always placed a high premium on in-camera editing. My filming in the Pacific was severely limited due to practical necessity. I had to plan my shots days in advance--shots of 30 or 40 seconds--so that I could fit six or seven scenes on the few film cartridges I received on an irregular basis via the errant postal service of undependable copra freighters. Nothing was wasted. Mistakes were made, batteries died, sound systems failed, but each scene counted. I continued this frugality and in-camera style when I returned home to the U.S. because my meager income dictated it.

I knew that if I wanted to become a master of camera movement and artistic vision I had to practice these skills. I have shot approximately 40,000 feet of "exercises" in the last few years. Even though there were always subjects, stories, and reasons for my shoots, I treated each 50-foot roll I took as a challenge to work on various aspects of my shooting style. Each roll became an unedited film unto itself. And the relatively low cost of super-8 gave me greater opportunities for honing my skills than I could have accomplished using a smaller amount of more expensive 16mm

film.

My desire for synchronous sound necessitated the use of some kind of sound equipment. But I was not willing to limit my freedom of movement with bulky tape decks or an extra person to take sound. The compactness of the single system rig meshed with my passion for single person sync shoots. I discovered other benefits as well:

Dispensing with a crew reduces filming costs substantially and opens up all kinds of new possibilities in subject matter. New levels of intimacy are possible.⁵

I realized that I was capable of treading where larger cameras could not go. I was able to film aboard outrigger canoes, inside thatched huts using available light, and all this with synchronous sound. Super-8 has a number of low-light (XL) cameras with 1.2f (1.4T) exposure capability. Not only was I a one-man camera/sound crew, but I was able to maneuver about in smaller places and cover larger distances with ease than is possible using 16mm. Super-8 seems designed for warm and intimate shooting situations.

The fluidity with which one can move the light-weight single system camera makes for an active eye that is not tied down to the sound recording machinery. Freedom of movement is total. No longer does heavy equipment have to cause sore shoulders, bad backs, and the too-prevalent jerky camera movement of 16mm hand-held movies. There is little pleasure for me in observing scenes with a preponderance of long, still shots because the camera movement was edited out--out of artistic necessity. Such works do not stimulate the visual imagination. A camera should expand the

artist's power of expression and not restrict it. That's my goal.

This is not to say that single system super-8 cameras do not have problems. The cameras are often too noisy for a fussy sound person. In extremely quiet situations, it is hard to avoid hearing the rumbling from inside the camera body. A simple barney can be improvised. However, the use of a directional microphone boom (a standard accessory), which extends out and over the camera, can minimize this interference. Most video cameras have built-in mics on the top (video is more quiet than the super-8 camera which transports its film inside plastic cartridges), but their recording range is limited by such construction. And placing a hand mic near the subject requires a cable attached to the video deck at all times.

The problems are as serious for single-person synchronous 16mm shoots. One runs risks when using a non-single system recording device (such as the SN tape recorder) which is small and portable enough to be placed away from the camera person:

The filmmaker's only concern for the technical side of sound is to change tapes . . . Since you cannot see the amount of tape left (the SN is on the subject) and an early run-out of sound would lead to unintentional picture without sound, I have tried to time tape changes when there is still a few minutes left on the roll. I then rewind the tape and put on a fresh roll (about 2 minutes). This is far too long in rush situations. ⁶

Compare that with the sync sound film cartridge that carries its own magnetic stripe for sound. As the technology improves (a redesigned, quieter film cartridge is in the works), camera noise will be of diminished concern to the filmmaker. In addition, many current models boast radio

mics that operate by remote control. It is a bother that super-8 technology originally placed the sound head eighteen frames ahead of the picture (creating a gap between sound and picture and complicating an otherwise perfect system), but that is more an inconvenience than a hardship in editing. I have edited a number of single system pieces. Since the projectors have the sound heads placed a corresponding distance away from the lens, there is no problem when projected. However, I have found it best to transfer my raw footage to 3/4" video cassettes for simple editing (since sound and picture are put in sync during transfer). Once on tape, I can repeatedly use various scenes in whole or in part without the added expense of extra film workprints. Video editing encourages versatility in the editing process. Transfer to video cassette also allows me to keep a virtually complete and uncut record of my film evolution.

My choice of video is based in large measure on a desire to have my work viewed by the largest audience at the smallest cost possible. Film is simply too expensive and easily scratched. Super-8 projection is not a viable means of distributing an artist's work. Professional movie houses have neither the necessary equipment for optimum projection nor the inclination to view "amateur" productions. It's possible to blow-up Super-8 to 16mm and while the results are excellent (Robert Frank's "Cocksucker Blues" is one such successful mixture of 16mm and super-8), the expense is great. As video image and color improve technologically, and with the tremendous market for home video players, super-8 film shown on television monitors is best in terms of the widest distribution possible. Many film folk brought up on projection find little beauty in the video signal. It is a question of taste. I do not share that

disdain.

Video has made it possible for the artist to send his work to an audience. With the introduction of videodisc to the consumer market, one's films can be sold in the same manner recording artists sell their albums. It's an exciting possibility. Distribution is the key for the independent filmmaker in the future, and videodisc seems to be one reasonable answer:

"Now, economics again: to make a print of a color 16mm film, say one hour long, costs at least \$500. It probably gets scratched the first time it gets projected. To manufacture an individual disc, one hour long, is 60¢, as opposed to \$500."

The cost of the transfer of such a film to disc is \$1,250 per side, or one half hour, according to Leacock. After this initial investment, the price drops to 60¢ per disc. While it is not possible to record on disc, one method he suggests would be to film using a super-8 or 16mm system, have prints made, edit the film, and then transfer it to video. An alternative would be to transfer the footage to video, edit on video, and then transfer to disc.⁷

For a small initial investment the independent artist can see his movies sold directly to the consumer for repeated home viewing. That means a far larger audience for the work than will go to an out-of-the-way art theatre. The costs will be minimal and profits larger than with the independent film distribution system at present.

It is in the interest of everyone connected with the film industries and independent production to bring filmmaking to the masses. Not simply the viewing of films (Hollywood has done that already), but the actual making of films itself. Cheap means should always be encouraged and inexpensive

works must be widely distributed to develop aspiring artists and new art forms. Independent filmmaking must expand beyond the narrow confines of those moviemakers who, by virtue of possessing healthy bank accounts, have purchased a career in the arts. Cheaper filmmaking and wider distribution will create the competition that is needed to revitalize the independent film business.

MIT made such a commitment when it began the Film Section a decade ago:

The deprofessionalization of filmmaking (by simplifying equipment, making it less cumbersome and less expensive) and opening the possibility for virtually anyone to film without years of training is something the film section at MIT has been committed to.⁸

In the fall of 1979 the Film/Video Section offered a new course in single system super-8 filmmaking. In conjunction with Ricky Leacock, I taught the use of the equipment to the first ten students. It was an experiment in group shoots. Some transferring of film was done to balky 1/2" video decks for purposes of editing. The technical aspects of mixing the two proved stifling to the creative energies of students who wanted to be set loose with the cameras. When the class was offered again in the spring, the group shoots were used only as an introductory teaching device, and the latter half of the course was devoted to individual efforts. All editing was done on film, and the inconvenience of the eighteen frame gap was minimal.

My experience in teaching this course while completing my own masters degree requirements has led me to the strong opinion that single system

super-8 is the ideal way to quickly learn the rudiments of filmmaking, thus allowing the student to begin using the self-contained unit in imaginative ways. This use of single system super-8 is an innovative attempt by MIT to further simplify filmmaking and open up the process to greater numbers of students at little cost. It makes practical sense to expand this commitment at a time when inflation is preventing people from filming with more traditional formats. A few improvements could be made. For example, some of the 3/4" video transfer and editing equipment could be made available to the class in the future for greater versatility in sound and picture editing. The single system sound capabilities could be enhanced by blimping the camera body and using some of the high quality mics (such as the ME-80s) which are available. The result of all this would be a profusion of quality super-8 productions, suitable for wide distribution and broadcast, while costing the school less money to operate than other existing options.

The MIT Film/Video Section has the capability and imagination to help bring about a substantive change in the way low-cost films are made and distributed. It is not fair to assume that super-8 was tried and did not work, or that the quality of single system super-8 is less than the double system super-8 of eight years ago. Now is the perfect time to attempt a new approach to filmmaking through the mix of super-8 and video. The original goal of Leacock and the MIT/Hampton team can be realized using equipment that is now available on the general market.

I am committed to single system super-8 because my experience tells me that nothing else compares. My thesis film research is a compilation

of the entire process of my evolution as a filmmaker. In addition to a lengthy personal account that records my past four years, there will be numerous episodes that will make up the great body of my work.

The excerpt that I am submitting in partial completion of my thesis requirements is one such episode entitled "In Search of the Great American Movie Star." It is a unique record of a 22-hour whirlwind search in the film capital of the world. Within the half-hour tape can be found a microcosm of everyone's search for a measure of success in the American order of things. Out of all the bizarre and ordinary characters that are encountered in my Hollywood stay, there are occasional small moments of revelation which teach us a bit more about ourselves. The Grandma from Elkhart describes in detail her image of a blonde goddess as that elusive star and then trails off with, "I don't know if you'll find her on this train or not . . .", and one realizes that each person who appears in front of my camera has become for that moment The Great American Movie Star.

The film was shot in 1978 and edited in 1980 as one episodic installment of my complete film. My Hollywood movie represents a turning point in my personal evolution with the camera. It marked the end of my role as the ethnographic observer of other people, with my appearance in front of the camera. It was the cautious beginning of my passion for personal filmmaking.

With the work that I am doing at MIT, I am interested in changing perceptions of making and viewing films through the juxtaposition of audiovisual interludes. My research will consist of one large film (70 minutes)

and twenty-five smaller pieces (3-30 minutes each), which together provide a record of my evolution as a filmmaker. While the movies are currently prepared to be shown in videocassettes, it is my plan that the entire body be placed on videodisc. In conjunction with a time code by frame and a cross-index for each piece, the viewer is capable of rapidly picking and choosing alternative segments and segues to fashion his own edit, much like a kaleidoscope can create innumerable images from a few bits of colored rock. I believe that this experiment will provide for a more personal experience for the audience. While it is a personal documentary of my last four years with film, the camera work is visually versatile. The cinema verite footage acts as the narrative thread throughout, with experimental applications of film and camera: macro photography, short bursts of visual images, hand-painted animation on 16mm film leader, single framing techniques and in-camera edited sections.

The sync sound (from the documentary footage) will be recorded on both audio channel 1 and 2. Each channel will then have a separate voice-over--providing a different narration and thus perception of the movie and the filmmaker, depending on which channel the audience chooses to view the film.

An innovative aspect to this multi-sensory approach is that Channel 1 and 2 can be played in conjunction, creating a third audio experience. If the viewer opts for this alternative, he will hear the two channels talking back and forth to each other in conversation--at times refuting each other--at times confirming the competing audio observations. And if one chooses to mix and match, alternating between a mix of the two channels and each channel separately at various intervals, any number of film experiences

can be created.

It is my hope that "Evolution of a Filmmaker" will continue to evolve for a lifetime.

FOOTNOTES

1. Gerald Zornow, "The \$1000-A-Minute Complex: Some Observations on the Pitfalls and Promises Surrounding Super-8 Film Systems." The 21st Calvin Workshop, February 6, 1967, p. 6.

2. Ed Pincus, "One Person Sync Sound." Filmmakers Newsletter, December 1972, p. 30.

"Videotaping super-8 original leads to an image that is at least the equal of a tape of a 16mm print."

3. Richard Leacock, "Leacock on Super-8, video discs, and distribution." Afterimage, Vol. 6, no. 10, p. 3.

4. Ibid., p. 3.

"You write a proposal, and here you are writing proposals again. So right away I'm in trouble, because I like to respond to what's going on instantly. You have to write a proposal that will be valid a year or a year and a half from now, which I find hard to conceive of . . ."

5. Pincus, op. cit., p. 25.

6. Ibid., p. 26.

7. Leacock, op. cit., p. 3.

8. Pincus, op. cit., p. 30.