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Kodak's worst nightmare Super 8 in the digital age: A cultural history of Super 8 filmmaking in Australia 1965-2003

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Kodak's Worst Nightmare: Super 8 in the Digital Age

A Cultural History of Super 8 Filmmaking in Australia 1965-2003

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

Kodak's Worst Nightmare: Super 8 in the Digital Age. A Cultural History of Super 8 Filmmaking in Australia 1965-2003

This project charts the extraordinary history of the Super 8 film medium, a popular amateur home movie format first introduced in 1965 and largely assumed to have disappeared with the advent of home video technologies in the early 1980's. *Kodak's Worst Nightmare* investigates the cultural history of the Super 8 medium with an emphasis on its (secret) life since 1986. It asks how (and why) an apparently obsolete consumer technology has survived some 35 years into a digital future despite the emergence of technologically-advanced domestic video formats and Eastman Kodak's sustained attempts since the mid-80s to suppress, what is for it, a patently unprofitable product line.

Informed by the work of Heath (1980), Zimmermann (1995), and Carroll (1996), this project takes the unusual step of isolating a specific amateur film medium as its object of study at the centre of a classic 'nature vs. nurture' debate. Arguing against a popular essentialist position which attributes the longevity of Super 8 to its unique, irreplaceable aesthetic, *Kodak's Worst Nightmare* proposes that Super 8 film has been a contested site in a social, cultural, political, and economic nexus where different agencies have appropriated the medium through the construction of discourses which have imposed their own meanings on the use and consumption of this cultural product. In an extraordinary cycle of subjugation, resistance and incorporation, this project finds that the meanings and potentials of Super 8 have been progressively colonised by differing institutions - firstly by Eastman Kodak ('domestic' Super 8), secondly by the alternative, independent film movement ('oppositional' Super 8 and 'indie' Super 8), and finally by the mainstream film and television industry ('professional' Super 8"). In an amazing contradiction, it is argued that Super 8 in its current incarnation has emerged as the exact opposite of Kodak's original discursive construction of its amateur status - it has become a professional medium for commercial production.

Drawing together related work in the histories of domestic photography and communications technologies, and the cultural practice of everyday life, this project contributes to an area which is seriously undertheorised in the literature of film theory and cultural studies - the social, political and cultural role of amateur film technologies.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
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I would like to acknowledge the encouragement and assistance of my supervisors, Dr. Rod Giblett and Dr. Dennis Wood in the preparation of this thesis.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Theorising Super 8

I see Super 8 as a very underground kind of thing. Kodak doesn't like developing it, they don't like producing things but it's still going. It's totally outdated, it's grainy. It's grungy, it's scratchy and it's very tactile... Dennon Pike, experimental filmmaker, 1997

A friend talked me into attending the first Metropolis Super 8 Film Festival in November, 1996. Standing in a long queue of glamorously dressed cinema-goers outside the Metropolis Concert Club in Fremantle, Western Australia, I looked on in amazement at the pavement antics of a large group of unruly (and obviously fake) paparazzi. No holds were barred as they surged towards a limousine bearing the first of the arriving finalist filmmakers.

Once inside the club, I found myself standing on the balconies with a well-dressed, but very raucous crowd. They apparently thought nothing of yelling out encouragement in the middle of the fifteen finalist films as they came up on the large central screen, and even less of hurling abuse at the judging panel as they made their post-film comments. It was then that I realised something special was going on. This was no ordinary local film festival being consumed by a polite, if slightly bored, cinema audience. The cheers and catcalls spoke of a 'festival of the people' encouraging participation in the unfolding events. This event had a special energy and sense of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1968) as filmmakers and audience alike both celebrated and playfully parodied the kind of hype normally associated with a major international film event like Cannes or Hollywood's Academy Awards. It seemed that a kind of oppositional politics was being expressed through the Metropolis Super 8 Film Festival – this was a dialogue between the constraining machine of commercial cinema and the spirit of independent (with a capital 'I') filmmaking – here was a dialogue between *core* and *periphery* with the emphasis on the periphery 'talking back' to the core.

The popular success of this festival raised some immediate questions. What had prompted 65 filmmakers to abandon 'technologically superior' video equipment and grapple with cranky old Super 8 home movie cameras (a technology which many had never encountered before) to make \$300, 3 minute epics on the theme of 'young love'? Why had a capacity crowd of around 3000 filled the concert club? It seemed to me that

behind this event were two significant catalysts. The first was festival director Ross Hampton, a skilled practitioner in public relations with a passion for independent filmmaking. Secondly, there was the medium itself, Super 8 film – an amateur home movie format consisting of tiny images on an 8mm wide strip of celluloid which had (apparently) been superseded by video more than a decade earlier. Without doubt, the success of this festival owed something to the mysterious 'aura' of the Super 8 medium – it seemed as though everyone involved with the Metropolis Super 8 Film Festival (hereafter referred to as the 'Metropolis') had been gripped by an outbreak of celluloid fever!

This led me to consider my own position in relation to the medium. My personal foray into Super 8 began around 1990 as an extension of my interest in photography and a response to the (then) very high cost of home video technology. I vividly recall purchasing my first Super 8 camera in a secondhand shop for \$20. At the time, a concerned junior salesperson warned me that I wouldn't be able to get film for it. I then headed off to one of a select few Kodak outlets in the city which I knew kept ciné film and purchased a roll for the same price as the camera!

This experience characterised Super 8 filmmaking in 1990 – invisibility. The public visibility of home video cameras served, in popular discourse, to locate Super 8 equipment as just another redundant household/leisure appliance. However, the prohibitive cost of home video cameras and the additional expense of the then rather cumbersome linear editing equipment placed video production beyond the reach of low income earners. Home video recorded endless hours of the family at play, while Super 8 became the vehicle of impoverished personal filmmakers: students, film artists, independents and enthusiasts. The latter offered the consumer an abundant supply of a low-cost, low-technology means of production. At the same time, Super 8 filmmaking continued in a climate of total indifference by monopoly filmstock producer and supplier Eastman Kodak. Kodak affected a stance of 'going through the motions' as it played out its statutory obligations to continue to produce Super 8 stock.

Super 8 filmmaking bore new connotations by the early 1990s. It was about low budgets, low technology and a certain attitude. Super 8 filmmaking, now in the hands of independents, film artists and film students, was anti-video and anti-establishment. It operated outside the dominant discourses of amateur and independent production in direct conflict with video technology and the multinational giant Eastman Kodak. As a Super 8 filmmaker in the early 1990s, I was part of an underground do-it-yourself 'punk' subculture which supported itself through informal networks of like-minded filmmakers.

In 1995, I ran my first community-based Super 8 filmmaking workshop in Perth. Some nine years later in 2004, over 250 people have passed through this 2-day workshop in personal filmmaking.

To some extent, the 1996 Metropolis Super 8 Film Festival felt like a familiar old shoe. The political 'edge' was there, as it parodied the apparatus and trappings of Hollywood. Festival press releases promoted Super 8 film as being an accessible, democratic medium of expression, explicitly in a way which implied false rhetoric in ideologies promoting the virtues of its technological successor, video. Additionally, it drew attention to the aesthetics of Super 8 film. As a member of the celluloid family, its 'look', its processes of production and its conditions of reception had more in common with 35mm motion picture film than that of videotape. It was about laboratories, saturated colours, dark spaces, specially gathered audiences and bright projector lights. The festival foregrounded that Super 8 retained the aura of the cinematic 'occasion' while video threatened to vanish into the banality of the endless televisual experience.

Yet there was something different about this event which jerked me into academic consciousness. Here was another shift in the production and consumption of Super 8 films. These were not home movies made by doting parents for screening in the family lounge, nor personal pieces made by film artists for screening on club nights. The Metropolis films were authored by both experienced and first-time independent filmmakers for public consumption in the unlikely venue of a nightclub – and the potential of winning a \$3000 first prize. This event popularised Super 8 by presenting it in a public context as commercial entertainment – a rather unexpected twist in the cultural history of an apparently marginalised and redundant amateur film medium.

The *Metropolis Super 8 Film Festival* represented the moment at which I first thought about the extraordinary events and contradictions which had so improbably kept the cultural commodity and cultural practice of Super 8 film alive. I realised that Super 8 film was at the centre of a unique cultural history characterised by a set of complex, historically shifting power relations between supplier, producer and consumer which had shaped and re-shaped the social, political and cultural role of this amateur filmmaking technology. What social, political and economic factors had led to Super 8's survival into this millennium? What (and whose) strategies had facilitated this survival and what did it now mean to be working in the Super 8 medium? How does Kodak, in 2004, articulate discourses in relation to the manufacturing and marketing of Super 8 films? Who is working with it and what politics and pleasures are expressed in the production and consumption of Super 8? Where did the aesthetics of the medium fit into the picture? Would Australian Super 8 culture continue to have a future in the

digital video age, and if so, what kind of future? These formed a body of questions to be addressed in a cultural analysis of Super 8 filmmaking.

Towards a Cultural History of Super 8 Filmmaking

The task of this project is to locate the practice of Super 8 filmmaking within a wider cultural context. This suggests a project residing at the intersection of cultural studies and film history. As a cultural practice, Super 8 filmmaking is fundamentally about a specific amateur film technology produced by a supplier (or suppliers) which has then been consumed through a variety of cultural practices; the publication of literature including advertising, filmmaker magazines and how-to books, the purchase of films, cameras, projectors and editing equipment, and the making and screening of films (textual production/reception). Although the common thread and starting point is the technology, all aspects of the equation need to be interrogated for a complete understanding of the cultural significance of Super 8 practice. This approach is heavily informed by Stephen Heath's 1980 essay, *The Cinematic Apparatus: Technology as Historical and Cultural Form*, which draws attention to the importance of studying technological aspects of the cinema as a way of understanding the wider social, political, and ideological processes underlying cinema as a social practice.

Questioning the primacy of a semiotic approach to cinema, which exclusively concerns itself with the study of film as 'meaningful' texts, Heath argues for a more eclectic approach to the field which recognises cinema as a wider site of cultural inquiry. He makes a case for studying what he terms the "cinematic apparatus", locating signifying practices and processes of textual reception and production within a technological context. This context recognises that the experience of film is fundamentally delivered through cinema-machines, machines which have had their own culturally significant history. Heath further integrates a technological history of cinema machines with both a social history and a political economy of the film industry:

The process of cinema ... is that of a process through which in particular economic situations a set of technical devices becomes an applied technology then a fully social technology; and that social technology can, must, be posed and studied in its effects of construction and meaning (Heath, 1980, p. 6)

McQuire (1998) also lends support to a technology-inspired approach to cultural analysis, arguing for the importance of studying the relationship of camera technology

to social formations – “Even the most cursory scan reveals the immense diversity of zones, functions and practices that camera technologies span in contemporary life” (p. 5). Citing the work of Heidegger (1977) as important in demonstrating that “any technology involves the establishment of a particular relation to the world” (p. 4), McQuire calls for further work in this area:

Critical theory has rarely treated the camera in a manner adequate to the complexity of the questions it raises. Despite the early example of those such as Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin ... a decisive absence still structures the dominant routes of politics, sociology and social theory: a paucity of reference to the camera and a lack of consideration of its social and political effects. (1998, pp. 4-5)

Although Heath may not have had a social history of amateur film technology in mind at the time of writing, his work laid an important foundation for the two major works in this area, Patricia Zimmermann's *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* and Alan Kattelle's *Home Movies: A History of the American Industry 1897 – 1979*.

Setting Parameters

Previous significant work on the history of amateur film (Zimmermann, 1995; Kattelle, 2000) has established a social and technological history of all amateur film gauges from the late 1890s in an American context. Conversely, this project concentrates on a single amateur medium, Super 8. It is also very interested in an Australian context, particularly the cultural history of Super 8 filmmaking in this country since 1986. The accompanying practical component of this project, *Celluloid Fever*, a one-hour documentary about the 1997 Metropolis Super 8 Film Festival, attempts to convey something of Perth's own Super 8 culture.

As will be seen below, both Zimmermann (1995) and Kattelle (2000) regard the cultural history of Super 8 film as all but laid to rest by the mid 1980s with the advent of home video technology. However, from my perspective, the moment at which Super 8 disappeared from the domestic domain was precisely the moment at which it became really interesting. This was the moment at which it potentially became available for deployment in a manner other than the role of family archiving, a role which had been carefully nurtured and propagated by its monopoly producer and supplier, Kodak. With Kodak having to all intents and purposes 'abandoned' discursive control of Super 8 by 1985, the time was ripe for someone else to speak on behalf of, and imagine a different

role for, Super 8 film. What followed from that point forms a major concern for this project.

Three Cultural Phases of Super 8

A cultural history of Super 8 filmmaking since 1965 needs some kind of organising structure, and in this work I have proposed a kind of overlapping linear history of the discursive domination of Super 8. While there have always been competing visions for the cultural role of Super 8 advanced by suppliers, producers and consumers with different social, political and economic agendas, this approach reflects the central thesis of this project - that Super 8 represents a contested site in a social, cultural, political, and economic nexus where, at various points in history, certain agencies have appropriated and dominated the medium through the construction of discourses which have privileged their own preferred meanings around the use and consumption of this cultural product. Three overlapping cultural 'phases' of Super 8 have been identified – 'Popular' Super 8 (1965–1985), 'Oppositional' Super 8 (1986–1995) and 'Indie' Super 8 (1996–2001). Each 'phase' is discussed separately in Chapters 3 to 5 (see synopses at end of this chapter), while Chapter 6, 'Super 8 Futures' concludes the work with an analysis of the current state of Super 8.

No story would be complete without its heroes and villains. In this case, the heroes of Super 8 have been those interventionist producers and consumers who have appropriated the medium to subvert dominant institutional structures. The villain, perhaps unsurprisingly, is monopoly supplier Eastman Kodak. Built on a business plan promoting revenue through the mass sale and processing of amateur films, the Kodak empire has always frowned upon low-volume product. Statutory obligations forced the ongoing production of Super 8 film beyond its heyday and Kodak was no doubt hopeful that the medium would die a quiet, natural death. As the Super 8 underground gained profile and built up a 'resistance' movement, Kodak's tactics changed.

By 1990, Kodak was in train with a low-profile strategy to wind down production of amateur filmstocks, a covert plan which was proceeding by stealth. Super 8 filmstock was a development of 'Standard' 8 (see next chapter) which had continued to be marketed alongside its successor. Kodak's campaign began with the deletion of all Standard 8 filmstocks in 1991, followed by laboratory closures and centralisation of processing (a strategy of 'poor servicing' which led to a 6 week wait for processing in Australia). A few years later several Super 8 filmstocks were discontinued for so-called 'environmental' reasons. However, Kodak's timing was less than perfect. As will be

seen in Chapter 5, Super 8 had regained a cultural foothold which caused Kodak to embark on a new strategy – a strategy to reclaim discursive control of the medium. Whether that battle has been won or not is discussed in the conclusion to this thesis.

Theoretical Frameworks: Super 8 at the Margins

As mentioned above, there are only two significant works on the history of amateur film, both of which were completed in the last decade. These will be discussed in detail at the end of the chapter. In taking a cultural studies approach, which is empowered to draw from “whatever fields are necessary to produce the knowledge for a particular project” (Grossberg, Nelson & Treichler, 1992, p. 2), it seems that three areas of academic endeavour have the most to offer a cultural history of Super 8 filmmaking. These include film history, political economy and the study of the cultural practices of everyday life. If amateur film has largely been neglected as an object of study, then there is much to be learned from existing work which has applied these theoretical frameworks to histories of commercial cinema, communications technologies and domestic photography. However, it remains problematic that both film history and the study of communications technologies have been primarily concerned, respectively, with commercial mass cinema and agents of mass communication. Little has been written in respect of amateur film and amateur communications technologies - that is, those technologies which have been about private, rather than public communications.

Film History and Super 8: Some Categories of Analysis

Despite an ambivalence towards amateur film, film history has much to offer this project in pointing toward some useful categories of research. Giannetti (1996) has noted the existence of competing approaches to film history, and has identified:

four different types of film history, each with its own set of philosophical assumptions, methods, and sources of evidence: (1) aesthetic film histories – film as art; (2) technological film histories – motion pictures as inventions and machines; (3) economic histories – film as industry; and (4) social histories – movies as a reflection of the audience's values, desires and fears. (p. 461)

Giannetti rejects the notion of a single, ‘correct’ film history in favour of a view which accommodates a multiplicity of approaches, each being “defined by the historian's

particular interests, biases, and prejudices" (p. 461). Allen and Gomery (1985) have investigated the strengths and weaknesses of these traditional approaches to film history, and like Giannetti, have called for a multi-faceted approach to theorising film history which recognises that "any given film represents the convergence of a number of historical forces: individual and institutional, filmic and non-filmic." (p. 105).

The overlap of any proposed research categories is a guiding principle in this project which seeks to collapse Giannetti's categories of economic and technological histories into a wider study of the political economy of Super 8, and to further collapse aesthetic and social histories into a wider study of the politics and pleasures of textual production and reception.

A Political Economy of Super 8 Filmmaking

"Film as industry" has tended to focus on the Hollywood studio system, and the way in which commercial feature films have figured as products of a vertically integrated production system which has worked to privilege the production of certain kinds of texts over others. In the case of amateur filmmaking, a different set of dependencies is at work, but dependencies which are still related to a large, vertically integrated multinational corporation.

Amateur production, of course, exists outside the apparatus of Hollywood studio production which requires approved scripts, 'name' actors, production investment and guaranteed commercial distribution. Amateur production is self-funded production which is dependent on a cost-effective supply of filmstock, cameras, film processing and editing and projection equipment. Thus the key economic relationship for the amateur is with the providers of the means of production rather than, in the case of commercial cinema, with those who arbitrate over what will be made.

The apparatus of amateur filmmaking is thus an important part of a domestic market economy, an environment in which suppliers compete to achieve a position of dominance. The history of communication technologies recognises that the evolution of film technology is part of a much longer history, a history of the invention, application and decline of communications technologies. Super 8 is but one of an historical series of image-recording technologies to be made available to the amateur through domestic mass-marketing – a series which began with photography and which has now evolved into digital video technology with the capacity to capture both still and moving images.

Although the status of Super 8 film as an image recording technology located in the private sphere makes for a problematic comparison with work on the history of mass communications technologies which have been primarily concerned with writing, the printing press, telegraph, telephone, electricity, television, radio and the internet (see Carey, 1989; Crowley & Heyer, 1991; Marvin, 1988; Winston, 1998), the literature has at least two important contributions to make to this project. The first is the way in which it has demonstrated that the introduction of new communications technologies has been steered by the dominant interests of capitalism, which have deployed new technologies of communication to affirm existing structures of power.

Winston (1996) has noted that market exploitation of new technologies has tended to be delayed until it is clear that the introduction of a new technology will not be harmful to dominant capital interests: "new technologies are constrained and diffused only insofar as their potential for radical disruption is constrained or suppressed" (p. 7). In concert with this line of argument, Chapter 2 will demonstrate that Kodak's introduction of Super 8 film followed on from a long-term global domination of amateur filmmaking, and represented yet another 'controlled release' of amateur filmmaking technology in a captive marketplace. A political economy of Super 8 filmmaking needs to recognise Kodak not only as the monopoly enterprise which introduced Super 8, but also as an entity which has dominated the sphere of amateur filmmaking from its very inception. Through its discursive practices and business strategies, Kodak has been able to influence not only the content and style of textual production, but also the design of cameras and cinematographic practices.

The second major contribution from this literature underscores the overlap between the political economy and cultural practice of Super 8 filmmaking. Czitrom (1984), Marvin (1988) and Carey (1989) have noted that historically, each new mass communications technology has been greeted with popular enthusiasm in terms of its potential for democratic participation and enhancement of the ideal of community, a potential which has consistently failed to be realised as big business has constrained that potential for its own vested interests. Super 8 film has only been a mass-communications technology in a limited sense (see Chapter 3). However, it has certainly been subject to attempts by the dominant interests of capital to constrain its meanings and uses.

The Cultural Practice of Super 8 Filmmaking

A social history of Super 8 is fundamentally different to a social history of the commercial cinema. It cannot be reduced to readings of texts as a "reflection of the audience's values, desires and fears" (see Giannetti, above). Super 8 is not just a cinema of reception, with its connotations of passive spectatorship, but clearly a cinema of participation – offering roles as actor, director, cameraperson, editor and projectionist. Amateur cinema is participatory cinema – inviting at least a celebration of family, if not community. Once Super 8 is seen to be about textual production and reception as much as the consumption of commodities, a wider set of questions come into play about the politics and pleasures of working on the medium. As a means of production made available to the masses, a prime question becomes: what has been done with it by whom, and why?

The shooting of home movies as an everyday practice suggests a subordination of textual aesthetics to the act of participating in routine family activities. In so doing, the camera becomes an extension of the family unit. Kodak marketing literature has sought to place Super 8 filmmaking clearly in the realm of domestic leisure and family-centred discourse – the apparently 'creative' act of filming the family could be seen as a response to Kodak's discursive imperatives which only served to sustain the economic domination of the company. This could also be seen as an example of "how the material, densely lived culture of everyday life is a contradictory mixture of creativity and constraint" (Fiske, 1992, p. 157).

The practice of everyday life, however, need not be seen as complete affirmation of existing structures of power (de Certeau, 1984). Slater (1991) has noted how the introduction of mass-market photography represented a contradictory potential, a potential for individual empowerment opposed to an institutional attempt to limit the meanings and uses of domestic photography:

in being transformed into a domestic consumption good, photography was at the same time *enabled* (the means of representation, of constructing meaning on a staggering scale were provided) and *limited*, structured (the means of representation were provided to a mass market of domestic, familial consumers). (p. 50)

This "contradictory potential" also identified in mass communications technologies (Czitrom, 1984; Marvin, 1988; Carey 1989) has been an object of struggle in amateur filmmaking. For supporters of the 1960s counterculture 'alternative technology'

movement, amateur film presented itself as a potential avenue for expression of personal politics and individual growth (Slack, 1984). Similar utopian visions of democratic expression were echoed by American avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas:

Eight mm. movies should be secretly shipped from Vietnam, 8 mm. movies should be shipped from the South; 8mm. movies taken by the ten-year-old Harlem kids armed not with guns but 8mm. cameras – let's flash them on our theatre screens, our home screens There should be no place on earth not covered by 8mm. movies Let's show everything, everything. (1972, p. 235)

As an avant-garde filmmaker, Mekas urged that Super 8 textual practice should represent subjects in a style which removed it from the connotations of home movies and mainstream commercial cinema. He saw it as a documentary art practice with revolutionary potential. Traditionally, the "film as art" approach has been interested in the celebration of masterpieces, auteurs and auteur style. This focus has been criticised as an elitist approach which has concentrated on developing a canon of classic film texts to the exclusion of consideration of the vast majority of filmworks and their filmmakers (Giannetti, 1996; Allen & Gomery, 1985).

By considering the aesthetics of film texts produced in a non-mainstream medium we are extending the parameters of texts usually considered by aesthetic histories. The need for an aesthetic history of Super 8 is less about the celebration of masterpieces, individuals and auteur style, but more about understanding whether certain styles or 'looks' can be associated with the discourses and politics of the three cultural phases of Super 8 identified earlier in this chapter. The survival of Super 8 is often attributed to its supposedly unique aesthetic properties (Hoberman, 1981; Grammenos, 2000; Crimmings, 2003) which have provided the gauge with an 'essential character' which has contained the meanings of Super 8 textual production and set up a notion of difference from other media. This media-specificity argument is rejected by Carroll (1996), who argues that the nature of textual production in any medium is historically contingent, and that chosen aesthetic strategies represent an expression of the politics and vested interests of the producers at a given time. It must not be forgotten that Super 8 film has been substantially a *silent* medium which has given primacy to image over sound. The debate around visual aesthetics of Super 8 is further examined in Chapters 4 and 5, where it is argued that any supposed 'essential character' of Super 8 has been eroded by its professional appropriation, which has re-shaped the political economy of Super 8 and attendant cultural practices of marketing, production and reception.

Social Histories of Photography and Amateur Film

While literature remains scant in the field of social uses of amateur film, there is a respectable literature in the related field of domestic photography. Work in this area makes a useful contribution to examining Super 8 during its heyday as a domestic object (1965-1985). Slater (1991, 1995), Hirsch (1997) and Holland (1997) have all described domestic photography as an activity linked to a private sphere dominated by home-based commodity consumption. They have characterised photography as being concerned with questions of individual and family identity while propagating an ideal of normal family behaviour through the capture of representations of 'appropriate' consumption-based leisure activities. The above writers have also explored domestic photography as a gendered activity; both as a two-tiered category encompassing 'feminine' snapshots of the family using simple cameras and as a more serious, 'masculine' artistic endeavour employing sophisticated equipment and artistic practices.

The two major works on amateur film, Alan Kattelle's *Home Movies: A History of the American Industry 1897-1979* and Patricia Zimmermann's *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*, make differing, but complementary contributions to my project. Although Kattelle (2000) purports to "cover all facets of amateur motion pictures – how they were made, who made them, and what they were all about" (p. vii), his work is more of a popular industrial history of amateur film, giving but brief attention to the "handful of learned treatises [which] have discussed the home movie as a social document" (p. vii). Nonetheless, Kattelle's work is helpful in establishing a political economy of amateur film with its chapters on Eastman Kodak and the Super 8 medium, and remains an important resource for this project.

Research into domestic photography has clearly informed Zimmermann's work in *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*, which Kattelle describes as "an ambitious study of of the origins of amateur film and the interaction of this medium with the popular literature on the subject, the film and equipment manufacturers, and professional filmmaking ie. Hollywood." (2000, p. 300). While this thesis benefits from Zimmermann's seminal work on amateur film, it also takes issue with several conclusions offered in her book.

Critiquing film studies' fascination with commercial cinema, Zimmermann's stated intention in her pioneering social history of amateur film is to "rescue amateur film and home movies from the trash and to rehabilitate these vehicles as an integral part of a suppressed and discarded film history" (p. xv). She does this by tracing the evolution

of amateur filmmaking technologies, industry marketing strategies and amateur filmmaking practices in the USA during the period from 1897 until 1962.

Zimmermann's starting point is to consider the initial potential of amateur film as a communication technology. Her work is a reply to the utopian visions of amateur filmmaking offered by champions of democratic potential such as Jonas Mekas and sociologist Hans Magnus Enzensberger as she poses the central question of her book:

How were consumer technologies like movie cameras drafted into an idealization of the family rather than developed as a means to critique social and political structures? (1995, p. xii)

Similar to the position taken by Slater (1991) in relation to domestic photography, Zimmermann argues that the meanings and uses of amateur film have been constrained by discourses circulated by dominant institutions like Kodak, and by the practices of marketing simple, user-friendly movie cameras which robbed operators of any sense of self-determination in cinematographic practice.

The latter point is argued to be one factor contributing to the erosion of the category of the 'amateur', which is seen initially as representing self-motivated filmmakers whose mastery of a new, technically complex medium signalled independence of thought and the potential for individual appropriation of the medium. Weaving in and out of all four categories of film history identified above by Giannetti (1996), Zimmermann looks at economic, political, social and aesthetic factors which disempowered the amateur, particularly a post-war social trend which redefined leisure time in terms of consumption and home-based activities. She notes how Kodak literature promoted the activity of archiving the family and stressed a 'professional' approach to the amateur product modelled on classic Hollywood realism.

Zimmermann's work relies on a Foucauldian approach to analysing "the public discourse that continually revamped the roles, functions, and purposes of amateur film, along with its relationship to industrial, marketing and technical formations" (p. xiii). Thus the discourses and practices of consumers, everyday life, popular magazines and camera manufacturers become her objects of study in a theoretical framework which is further clarified as follows:

Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film defines this rather slippery term *discourse* as a system of statements locating a specific territory in language – in this case, amateur film. Institutional and

social relationships, on the other hand, constitute practices. Amateur aesthetic advice expresses discursive relations, while the economic structures of the amateur-film manufacturing industry, equipment, designs, and political context chart the more material relations of the non-discursive. (p. xiii)

Ultimately, Zimmermann relates a tale of woe, a tale of the disenfranchisement of the potential of amateur film which reaches its low point with the introduction of Super 8 films – “by the early 1960s amateur film had become firmly ensconced within the patriarchal bourgeois nuclear family, signaling the end of discursive contestation over its definition and placement” (p. xv). She quickly moves on to discuss the advent of home video technology, praising the progressive potentials of video-diaries and video counter-surveillance activity which displaced Super 8 as a “mute technological dinosaur lacking audio or stereo sound.” (p.149).

As Zimmermann reaches a conclusion to her book, there is a positive moment for Super 8 when she describes the efforts of avant-garde filmmakers working on the medium as an expression of “liberated amateurism” (p. 146) before a final admission that “while Hollywood and corporate interests monitored, controlled and sequestered them, these amateur cameras did, in a very minimal way, democratize media production” (p.157).

It is where Zimmermann's work stops that this project begins. Like Marschessault (1996), I feel that Zimmermann's text, although a valuable pioneering effort, presents “an overdetermined image of amateur film practice” (p. 420). Problems arise in at least three contexts. The first problem is with Zimmermann's definition of the amateur, a definition which seems, conveniently, finally reducible to the family archivist. I would argue that amateur filmmaking extends beyond the boundaries of unskilled parent-filmmakers to anybody producing films on a voluntary or unpaid basis - ie. working outside the auspices of the mainstream film industry – be that home movie maker, film artist, film student, film club member or struggling independent. In particular, I would argue that the role of the avant-garde filmmaker needs greater attention – it is in his/her practice that significant technical mastery and an oppositional politics is expressed.

Secondly, as indicated above, it seems somewhat premature to conclude that amateur film practice had stagnated to the point of no further potential by the early 1960s. Super 8 film, yet to be introduced in 1965, was about to offer the greatest market penetration of the means of production in amateur film. The era of Popular Super 8 (1965 – 1985) surely deserves greater attention, if only to confirm Zimmermann's position.

Marschessault (1996) takes direct issue with Zimmermann's dismissive treatment of home movies:

Is it not possible to find in the production and consumption of personal images and family memories a form of democratic expression instead of discursive colonisation *tout court*? (p. 420)

Thirdly, there is a need to respond to the tendency for histories of communication technologies to lose interest in their subject at the moment the technology has apparently been superseded. What is interesting and significant about Super 8 as a communications technology is its history since its popular demise, a history which Zimmermann has largely chosen to ignore. Kattelle (2000) at least acknowledges this work even if no attempt is made to analyse its social significance:

It should be understood that by 1986 Super 8 was swiftly being displaced by the video camera for the average "home movie" maker, but was still the medium of choice for the distinctly different amateurs who thought of themselves as "independent film makers". (p. 297)

Contrary to the approach of studying "old technologies when they were new" (Marvin, 1988), this project foregrounds the importance of studying "old technologies when they are old". It is during the 'decline' of a communication technology, that the most potential for subversion, appropriation and democratisation of the form is offered. Additionally, this thesis offers the opportunity to consider amateur filmmaking in a wider cultural context beyond Zimmermann and Kattelle's analysis of the American experience. In taking a local focus, this project asks whether the Australian experience has been any different.

Before we can commence a journey into Super 8 culture, it is important to locate it against the wider history and tradition of amateur filmmaking. The next chapter, *Enter the Amateur*, addresses some key questions which underpin an analysis of the three cultural phases of Super 8 to be presented in later chapters and sets a foundation for understanding the political economy of amateur filmmaking.

Chapter 3, *Popular Super 8 (1965-1985)* looks at Super 8 home movies in relation to the politics of everyday life. Chapter 4, *Oppositional Super 8 (1986-1995)* focuses on the politics and aesthetics of personal filmmaking in an Australian scene then dominated by the avant-garde movement. Chapter 5, *Indie Super 8 (1996-2001)* charts a turn towards Kodak's discursive reclamation of the medium as the unexpected

professionalisation of Super 8 offers a threat to its dominant industry position. The final chapter, *Super 8 Futures* (Pro '8' and Beyond) considers whether Super 8 continues to have a future in the digital domain.

CHAPTER 2

Enter the Amateur: *The Beginnings of Amateur Film*

The amateur's lack of fixity, regularity and coherence disrupted, challenged and in the end supported the capitalist system of efficiency, repetition and prediction. ... Amateuism deflected the chaotic, the incoherent, and the spontaneous into leisure and private life so that public time could persist as methodical, controllable and regulated. (Zimmermann, 1995, p. 11)

A pre-condition to understanding the place of Super 8 in the amateur filmmaking mediascape is the investigation of the wider history of amateur film. Super 8 culture is historically located at the end of a tradition of amateur filmmaking which began with the birth of motion picture film at the end of the nineteenth century. Some key questions suggest themselves: How do we understand the term, 'amateur film'? When and how did amateur filmmaking begin? What social, political and economic forces gave birth to amateur film? How did these forces shape amateur filmmaking technologies and practices? Considering these questions provides a solid foundation for looking at Super 8 in the three cultural 'phases' proposed in the previous chapter.

In broad terms, the beginning of amateur filmmaking can be seen as a combination of several key factors. A significant category of factors is that of 'external' social, political and economic influences – factors which have shaped and re-shaped relations between suppliers and producer/consumers of amateur film. The most obvious of these is the increased affluence of the middle classes since the industrial revolution, an affluence which has gone hand-in-hand with the increased availability of leisure time. This enabled the possibility of serious 'amateur' pursuits (hobbies) which both represented the freedom of the individual and expressed individual identity. Amateur movie-making emerged as one of these pursuits.

A second influence has been the much longer history of amateur still photography – the forebear of amateur motion pictures. By 1888, Eastman Kodak had thoroughly colonised the amateur photography market through development of a cost-effective, total service package which removed the need for consumers to be literate in the technology of the camera and the chemistry of processing. Kodak's 'you press the

button, we do the rest' philosophy established a set of relations between producer and consumer which provided a ready-made model for Kodak's later domination of the amateur filmmaking market.

A third key factor has been the early history of manufacture and marketing of amateur film, amateur film cameras and projection equipment. Research in this area reveals the somewhat incestuous relationship of amateur film with its binary opposite, 'professional' film. The political economy of amateur film can be seen as an extension of the political economy of professional film. The latter was quickly dominated by major American producers of filmstock, film cameras and projection equipment who sought to protect their market position by having their patented products adopted as industry standards, thereby excluding participation by other manufacturers.

The last factor has been the discursive and non-discursive practices of amateur film culture itself. From the very beginning of amateur filmmaking, there has been an ongoing dialogue between manufacturers of amateur production equipment (marketing literature), commentators on amateur filmmaking (secondary texts such as popular filmmaking magazines and 'how to' books) and most importantly, filmmakers themselves, who have expressed their desires through their own amateur film texts and their practices of production and exhibition. This discursive arena has been a site of contest over the meanings and pleasures of amateur film practice.

Zimmermann (1995) has identified four significant periods in the social history of amateur film (1897-1923, 1924-1940, 1941-1949 and 1950-1962), each of which is shaped by particular social, economic and technological determinants. Central to Zimmermann's thesis is the notion that the meanings and practices of amateur film have shifted with each succeeding era, but always to the detriment of the amateur, who has been relegated to playing out the role laid down for him/her within the restrictive discursive boundaries set by dominant institutions such as Eastman Kodak. A brief investigation of the history of amateur photography, which began almost 60 years earlier than amateur cinematography, serves as a useful introduction to the beginnings of amateur motion pictures.

Early Amateur Photography

A significant parallel between domestic photography and home movies is their common status as silent media. Although 8mm and Super 8 home movies offered the possibility of sound, this was not a popular option with the average consumer for reasons of cost and cumbersome operation. Rather, the experience of a photograph, like that of the home movie, has often been an experience mediated by live commentary, a commentary which extends beyond passive reception of photographic captions and documentary narration. Photographs and home movies are often presented by their originator(s), who provide an interactive mode for their interpretation and enjoyment – there is the opportunity to seek further information about the representations on offer. That being said, a fundamental difference exists between the consumption of domestic photographs and home movies. The former is easily accessible. It is purely a matter of emptying an envelope or opening an album. The latter, with the exception of films already transferred to video, remains a cinematic event with connotations of ritual – a darkened room complete with projector and screen, projectionist and audience.

Photography came with the amateur invention of the daguerrotype camera of 1840, which produced positive images on iodised silver plates. Professional photography soon flourished as portraiture became the favoured genre for the daguerrotypist. A long exposure was required to register an image, and typically subjects would hold an extended pose for the camera, itself a bulky device which needed to be mounted on a tripod for stability. Copying technologies quickly progressed so that images could be reproduced on photographic papers. In the early days of photography, as Slater points out, there was a symbiotic relationship between users and producers of photographic equipment:

Photographer and provider of photographic equipment (often the same person) were in some kind of dialogue, both together evolving a sense of the technology and its possibilities. (1991, p. 50)

Of amateurs who sought to dabble in this new field, two things were demanded: the financial means to access equipment and chemicals, and technical knowledge of both the camera and film chemistry. Home photography in the nineteenth century became the pursuit of wealthy hobbyists who had sufficient leisure time to indulge in the new science and art. Although the work of most amateurs of this time was invested in the

Victorian family album, a decorative scrapbook-style compilation of self-authored photographs, knick-knacks and purchased photographs, more 'serious' photographers began to develop aesthetic practices which extended beyond stiffly-posed formal family portraits. Although 'serious' amateur photography has been constructed as a masculine pursuit (Slater, 1991), Holland has noted the early contribution of women photographers to a shift in aesthetic practice:

Among the most celebrated photographers of the nineteenth century were comfortably-off women with plenty of leisure and domestic help, who made use of their family and their immediate surroundings as raw material for their photographic works, rather than as family record. Julia Margaret Cameron's misty portraits and visions of cupids and angels embraced and transcended Victorian romanticism. (1997, p. 121)

Holland charts an important shift in the aesthetics of amateur photography towards the end of the century, as sober Victorian attitudes which had favoured the stiff, formal portrait gave way to the "celebration of life and a taste for informality" (p. 121). The arrival of hand-held cameras provided new photographic possibilities:

Albums of the 1880s, compared with those of the 1860s, show a much more relaxed style and closeness to subjects. The movement and visual interest is now in the picture itself rather than in the decoration and arrangement of the pictures on the page. (1997, p.121)

The arrival of hand-held cameras and roll film with a faster emulsion capable of short exposures fuelled the possibility of a new kind of documentary photography, a photography which could unobtrusively observe and did not rely on the staging of subjects and images. Not only that, but George Eastman's release of the first Kodak camera in 1888 heralded a new accessibility to amateur photography – for the first time amateur photography was within the financial reach of the working classes.

Photography for the Masses

Slater (1991) has described Eastman's introduction of the new hand-held camera as a marketing revolution rather than a technological revolution:

In 1888, he introduced what we might call a complete marketing concept. The consumer bought a Kodak *camera*, already loaded with a 100-frame roll film. When the film was finished, the whole camera was sent back to Kodak's Rochester plant for processing and reloading. Camera and prints were then sent back by devising and selling a complete photographic package, Eastman was able to sell photography itself: a new photography, to new markets, on a new basis, it could be sold as a cheap, simple and reliable consumer commodity. (p. 52)

Arrival of the Kodak camera coincided with an increase in leisure time for the working classes, as working hours were shortened and Saturday became a day off which could be dedicated to leisure activities. Leisure time thus presented itself as a new market to be colonised by the interests of capital. Holland (1997) has noted that leisure time activities became clustered around the home, sporting pursuits and holidays, with Kodak publicity of the period working hard to locate photography as a natural adjunct to leisure activities:

The theme was looking outwards. The new photographer should make the most of new facilities for travelling – the train and the bicycle – and point their camera at the picturesque and the unusual. Looking inwards towards the domestic and creating an exclusive record of your family was a parallel message, directed largely at women in the middle classes. (p. 129)

The simplicity of use of the fixed focus, fixed aperture camera almost guaranteed results with Eastman claiming an 80% image success rate among domestic photographers as early as the 1890s. This only encouraged the consumption of film, so that photography became a signifier of leisure and prosperity - it "fitted in with being a modern consumer; having a camera itself wafted one along the same breeze of newness and leisure time freedom as having a bicycle" (Slater, 1991, p. 59). However, the 'Box Brownie' era also marked a shift in perceptions of domestic photography, and Holland maps the emerging distinction between 'amateur' photography, which continued to have connotations of craft and artisanship, and 'snapshot' photography, with its connotations of spontaneity, simplicity, and democratic access:

In the twentieth century, the more individualist activities which the full photographic process demands have become part of the 'amateur photography' movement. Amateur photography has been a more masculine

pastime, scornful of the snapshot's cheery refusal to concern itself with the complexities of the medium. It has its own magazines, competitions and standards, and its long-lived aspiration to the sort of pictorialism fashionable among artist-photographers at the turn of the century. (1997, p.128)

The early history of amateur photography provides a powerful analytical framework for comparing and contrasting the progress of amateur cinematography. Here, as will be seen in the case of amateur cinematography, the early success of Eastman Kodak in establishing and prescribing various standards in relation to amateur photography has been crucial in determining the meanings and practices of domestic photography. Already, there has been a suggestion that the technology and discourses of snapshot photography have steered amateurs into concentrating their work on the family and around consumption-based leisure activities, rather than encouraging engagement with aesthetics or politics.

Zimmermann charts a similar progression in relation to amateur cinematography, and her above-mentioned historical categories are useful for charting major shifts in the nature and emphasis of amateur motion pictures. The period 1897-1923 is significant for the birth of the first amateur film gauge, 16mm, from which Super 8 film is ultimately descended. 1924 –1940 takes in a convoluted period of world history, encompassing post World War I prosperity, the Depression and onset of World War II. It was during this period that 'Standard 8', the immediate predecessor of Super 8, came into being and 8mm filmmaking began. 1940-1949 saw the professionalisation of the 16mm gauge and its departure from amateur ranks. 1950 – 1962 is seen as a period of postwar prosperity in which amateur film practice fell victim to the dominant forces of familialism and consumption. The professionalisation of 16mm film paved the way for the exclusive domination of amateur filmmaking by Standard 8mm and Super 8 gauges up until the mid-1980s, at which time its position was usurped by domestic video technology.

Kodak Sets the Standards: 1897-1922

The race to document motion on film reached a significant point in the late 1880s as America's Thomas Edison and the Lumière brothers of France perfected their own camera and projection systems. While the Edison system of the late 1890s

incorporated the separate machines of the unwieldy Kinetograph camera and the Vitascope projector, the Lumière brothers' invention of a portable, combined camera/projector system in 1896 changed the face of production and exhibition, permitting a kind of travelling roadshow. The advent of projection gave rise to the first standard adopted by the cinema, the film gauge of 35mm. Although the Lumière brothers and Edison had both been working on 35mm stock (the latter supplied by Eastman-Kodak from 1889), other filmmakers had experimented with a variety of gauges of lesser or greater width. Winston (1996) has somewhat whimsically commented on the arbitrary nature of the 35mm standard:

35mm arose from the natural (as it were) inclination of early researchers to work with film strips in culturally familiar widths The adoption of 35mm as 'the standard of the art' has less to do with utility than with unexamined cultural prejudice - the elegant combination of the Anglo-Saxon inch with 35 Gallic millimetres. (p. 59)

Winston has also pointed to the overarching significance of standards in the motion picture industry and the role played by that industry's standard-governing body, the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers (SMPTE) in setting up 'professional' standards for filmmaking and projection equipment. SMPTE declared the first industry standard of 35mm at their inaugural meeting of 1916. Winston points out that, by implication, the declaration of a standard for professional filmmaking invites a category of the 'substandard' – equipment, personnel, practices and film-texts which fail to reach industry expectations. In this way, the Hollywood machine created a culture of exclusion:

It can be argued that the entire development of Hollywood technology turns on the question of "standards" and that these, when designated as 'professional', operate as a form of suppression the basic tendency in movie technology was to opt for complexity and expense, creating *de facto* barriers to entry. Not anybody could become a 'professional' film-maker. (1996, p. 58)

Zimmermann picks up on the same thread as she describes the limited sphere of the amateur cinematographer:

the definition of amateur filmmaking was based on non-conformity to more dominant technological standards. These standards guaranteed professional film access to larger markets. The wide array of [non-35mm] camera designs and formats not only fragmented and isolated producers but also prevented them from competing with professionals shooting 35mm stock. (1995, p. 12)

The establishment of the SMPTE succeeded a far more insidious body, that of the Motion Pictures Patents Company (MPPC), formed in 1908. Reflecting the "equipment-centric, patent-protected orientation of the early film industry" (Zimmermann, 1995, p. 15), the MPPC existed as a trust which pooled sixteen patents between Eastman Kodak and several key film distributors, camera manufacturers and projector manufacturers. The former was assigned exclusive rights to supply ciné-film to this professional cartel, which effectively held a monopoly on the distribution and exhibition of commercial pictures. By 1910, Kodak was supplying 90% of the market with ciné-film and significantly, camera and projector manufacturer Bell and Howell had joined the MPPC with a standard for perforating 35mm film and the mechanical movement which drew it through both camera and projector. This was a particularly significant relationship for Bell and Howell:

Bell and Howell's prominent position in the amateur motion picture camera market in the 1920s emerged from these relationships with the MPPC. Their alliance erected industry standards and squeezed other competing perforation designs and film widths out of the mass-entertainment market. (Zimmermann, 1995, p. 16)

With the commercial market all but sown up, the amateur arena continued to be contested ground and drew interest from a number of equipment manufacturers keen to exploit this potential market. Different film gauges proliferated up until the early 1920s as diverse manufacturers sought to lock clients into their particular version of the sub-standard. Amateur filmmakers were confronted with a confusing array of 11, 15, 17.5, 21, 22 and 28mm film widths.

Zimmermann has noted how this technological diversity was incorporated into the discourse of amateur film by positioning amateur filmmakers as entrepreneurial technical innovators capable of developing their own equipment. She aligns this discourse with the classic myth of the amateur as craft-based inventor, reinforcing an

ideology of individual success outside the de-humanising, specialised structures of industrial manufacturing. Her survey of relevant literature about amateur motion pictures up until 1923 finds that amateur filmmaking had minimal exposure in popular lifestyle magazines. Discussion was centred on equipment and largely confined to technical journals, which encouraged amateurs to work around patent restrictions by developing their own cameras, incorporating alternative, simplified film transport mechanisms:

From the disposition of documentary evidence from this period, amateur film equipment seems to have been a technical oddity for hobbyists to follow rather than a large social practice or art involving great numbers of people. (1995, p. 17)

This was to change with the standardisation of amateur film in 1923. However, by 1913, discourses around the aesthetics of amateur film had begun to evolve, largely influenced by the dominant tropes of amateur photography. Zimmermann examines a number of emerging discourses in amateur photographic journals in the period up until 1923. These stress a preferred view of technically literate, serious, 'artistic' amateur cinematography built on the principles of pictorialism, as opposed to the undisciplined snapshotting approach of popular photography. To some extent this was a spurious distinction to make, as the fiddly manual technology of this time did not facilitate a style of rapid and spontaneous shooting, but this trend articulated a desire to imitate the professional, to strive for 'professional' results.

Zimmermann (1995) sees pictorialism - "the use of composition that imitated painting to convey an abstract idea that would organise chaotic visual elements" (p. 33), as a contradictory force in amateur film. At one level, it located amateur film as an 'art', a leisure-based practice which separated it from commercial, industrial concerns. At another level, the potentials of amateur film were constrained through calls to imitate an established classical style of painting which valorised nature and natural subjects, thereby directing amateur cinematographers to contemplate the natural beauty of the family rather than the social injustices of modern industrial life (p. 42).

As sparse discourses around amateur cinematography developed, they stood in direct contrast to popular literature reflecting on the developing Hollywood film industry. Zimmermann has noted the proliferation of 'how-to' books, offering the aspiring actor, director and cinematographer endless advice on how to succeed in Hollywood. This

literature underwrote the American dream and offered support for the “making-it-in-Hollywood myth in amateur film discourse” (p. 51). This myth continues to have resonance today amongst emerging commercial filmmakers in the culture of independent film. For Zimmermann, the arrival of the 1920s marked an important re-positioning of amateur film as a training ground for professional film, with a new emphasis on imitating the aesthetic standards of Hollywood.

However, up until 1923, amateur cinematography had remained the preserve of the independently wealthy and technically literate. Early amateur emulsions were placed on a highly inflammable nitrate base, where the camera original was developed as a ‘negative’ film and then optically printed to another roll of nitrate film as a ‘positive’. Attempts by competitors to launch a significant amateur market during this time had met with negligible success, and thus far Eastman Kodak had avoided competing in the marketplace. The poor economics of printing from negative to positive (double-handling) had been seen by Kodak’s research department as a cost factor inhibiting mass-market participation (Matthews & Tarkington, 1983). Attempts had been made by research staff since 1914 to develop a process in which the camera original could be treated to provide positive images. Encouraged by early success, Eastman Kodak settled on a film width of 16mm in 1916 as it concentrated efforts on perfecting its *Ciné-Kodak* ‘reversal’ process for black and white filmstock. By 1922, the *Ciné-Kodak* process had reached a high level of reliability, but was still not in commercial production. The impetus to enter the amateur ciné market was to come from a competitor on another continent, a competitor who synthesised their own approach with lessons learned from Kodak’s domination of mass photography.

In late 1922, French manufacturer Pathé released a home projection system for film in a 9.5mm width. Unlike most conventional filmstocks which carried perforations for film transport on their edges, a single perforation appeared between each frame in the centre of the film. Subject matter for the new *Pathé-Baby* projector consisted of prints of commercial cinema releases which had been reduction-printed from 35mm to 9.5mm. A precursor of today’s home video and DVD release of commercial films, *Pathé Library Films* enjoyed early market success, which led the company to consider the possibility of consumers making their own films. In the same year, Pathé designed a 9.5mm motion picture camera for amateur use and released it in 1923. Like Kodak, Pathé had devised a ‘safety’ (non-nitrate) film stock which could be reversal-processed, and envisioned that the customer would process his/her own films using a home-processing kit made available by the company.

Kodak's response to the Pathé package was to launch their 16mm filmstock and the *Ciné-Kodak* process as soon as was practicable. They did this later in 1923, launching the new filmstock along with their first amateur camera, the Model A Ciné-Kodak. However, unlike Pathé, Kodak elected to retain responsibility for all film processing. This had a lot to do with their espoused philosophy of "You press the button, we do the rest" expressed as a famous advertising slogan, but also acknowledged "the special equipment and skill required to develop the film" (Matthews & Tarkington, 1983, p. 133). Pathé in France soon followed this lead as home-processing by their customers led to indifferent results.

As the 1920s concluded, amateur filmmaking no longer entailed an understanding of the chemical processes of development and optical printing. The amateur was no longer an active agent in the evolution of filmmaking but beginning to be subjugated by it. While the cost-effectiveness of reversal film lent itself to amateur use, it also protected the interests of commercial film-making. Reversal film did not lend itself to easy reproduction – it was not a medium for independent distribution and exhibition. Nonetheless, the means for home-movie making were now available on a mass scale.

1924-1940: Home Movies Get Started

This period is important both for its technological development and the beginning of significant discourse about amateur filmmaking in professional, trade and amateur publications.

Early market forecasts foresaw an enthusiastic take-up of amateur filmmaking, just as had been the case with domestic photography, and the major American ciné equipment manufacturers of the time were quick to jump on the bandwagon:

Within the year of 1923 the Victor Animatograph Co. (Davenport, Iowa) and the Bell and Howell Co. (Chicago, Ill.) introduced equipment using the new 16mm film, recognising the probability that it would become a standard for home use. (Matthews & Tarkington, 1983, p. 134)

This assessment turned out to be well founded as the SMPTE proposed a standard for 16mm film in 1924 which was eventually ratified by the American Engineering

Standards Committee in 1928. Amateur filmmaking now had a consistency of approach and other film manufacturers such as Agfa, Gaevert, Mimosas, Ilford, Ansco and Du Pont began to produce and process 9.5 and 16mm stocks. However, none could match the market domination of Eastman Kodak, who capitalised on their existing infrastructure of still photography laboratories to have ciné film processing stations in place around the world by the late 1920s.

Zimmermann (1995) characterises this era as a shift from competition to collusion, and has noted how the oligopoly of equipment manufacturers (Eastman Kodak, Bell and Howell, Victor Animatograph) redeployed marketing tactics for their professional equipment into the amateur market. By advertising the quality and professionalism of their respective products, the attention of amateur filmmakers was directed towards their equipment and its need to be of a professional standard, just like the cameras used in Hollywood. As a logical extension of owning amateur equipment constructed to a 'professional' standard, filmmaking magazines and trade journals of the era exhorted their readers to shoot professionally, imitating the processes of Classic Hollywood Realism.

The means of production for mass amateur filmmaking on an international scale was now in place. At this early stage, of course, amateur film remained a silent cinema as the advent of sound had yet to reach Hollywood. Despite enthusiastic forecasts of the mass take-up of amateur cinematography, and the establishment in America of the Amateur Cinema League in 1926, whose publication *Amateur Movie Makers* promoted the new hobby, take-up of 16mm filmmaking failed to reach anticipated levels. Photography continued to be perceived as a cheaper, less complex way of recording the family. The situation looked even darker for manufacturers of amateur film products as America and the western world headed towards the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The Depression Begets a Child – 8mm Is Born

The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 brought the domestic amateur market to a standstill. Previously driven by the imperative to sell sub-standard equipment with professional attributes to the amateur market, the cartel now found themselves selling amateur equipment to the professional market. With the death of the amateur market, the oligopoly of Kodak, Bell and Howell, and Victor Animatograph adapted 16mm amateur equipment to professional needs on both technological and discursive levels.

Thus, 16mm was re-cast as the perfect medium for producing independent films for the corporate and education sector – a proposition which failed to find immediate favour in the marketplace. This marked the beginning of a ‘professionalisation’ of 16mm. Bell and Howell’s chief 16mm camera of the time, the Filmo 70D, enjoyed a reputation for compactness, quality and reliability – a reputation which would propel it into the hands of countless war cinematographers in the next decade. Despite re-direction of marketing strategies, sales of Bell and Howell cameras dropped from \$4.5 million in 1929 to \$880,000 in 1932 (Robinson, in Zimmermann, 1995), and the company was compelled to look at cheaper manufacturing options. With just as much at stake in the amateur market, Eastman Kodak was quick to provide an answer which took advantage of their existing manufacturing and processing operations.

In August 1932, Kodak released cameras and projectors for Standard 8mm film, the precursor of Super 8 as we know it today. However, the film as supplied to the customer was not actually 8mm wide. The economic thrust behind the ‘new’ gauge was based on the ability to use existing 16mm black and white stock, which was passed through the camera twice to provide two rows of 8mm images. During processing, the film was slit in halves and joined end-to-end to form an 8mm roll. This added an extra layer of complexity to processing which required a specialised cutting machine, something which made home processing even less of an attractive option.

Bell and Howell and Eastman Kodak continued their alliance by agreeing on ‘Standard’ 8 (also known as ‘Regular’ 8 and ‘Double’ 8) as a new amateur standard and the domestic market embraced its arrival. Following the introduction of Bell and Howell’s first 8mm camera in 1934, sales rose by 60% in 1936 and doubled again in 1937 (Bearchell, in Zimmermann, 1995). Amateur filmmaking had finally achieved a critical mass, one which not only sustained manufacturers but nurtured an industry of commentary. Debates began in various new magazines devoted to amateur movie-making about appropriate subjects for films and technical and aesthetic practices. However, Eastman Kodak had one more major innovation to offer in the period before the Second World War – the aesthetic wonder of colour.

Amateur Aesthetics: Kodachrome Rules

Innovation continued at the laboratories of Eastman-Kodak, and colour film found its way into amateur filmmaking long before it became the dominant practice in Hollywood

cinema. This was due to the invention of Kodachrome reversal film, a fine-grain colour stock which found its way into the world as a 16mm stock in 1935, later to be repackaged as 8mm in the following year. Amazingly, the same stock remains available in Super 8 today, almost 70 years later!

Kodachrome opened up a whole new visual language for the amateur filmmaker while Hollywood struggled with the technical problems of printing from colour negative and a prevailing visual language of motion pictures which was rooted in the manipulation of highly subtle black and white stocks (reaching its height, perhaps, in Gregg Toland's cinematography for Orson Welles' 1941 film, *Citizen Kane*). Amateur filmmakers were quick to embrace the new product:

Within five years of the introduction of Kodachrome 16mm and 8mm film, over 50 percent of home movies were shot in color, and by the 1950s that proportion of colour had risen to nearly 100 percent. (Collins, 1994, p. 265)

Zimmermann (1995) describes these early years of the pre-war amateur boom as contested discursive territory. While popular magazines of the time such as *American Cinematographer*, *Popular Science* and *Photo Era* promoted narrative structure, framing and composition along the lines of Hollywood features, it seemed that a very different style was being articulated in amateur 'home movies' of the period.

Seemingly rejecting order and embracing chaos, home movies on the approved subject of the family were often shot spontaneously in wide framings utilising long takes achieved with a shaky hand-held camera. The fiddly process of editing was often ignored altogether. If this undisciplined style of documenting reality constituted experimentation and some level of resistance to the (institutionally) preferred paradigm of constructed narrative and aping of Hollywood shot-making, then a more radical form of resistance arose with the arrival of the American Avant-Garde in 1928. Inspired by intense experimental film activity in Europe between 1924 and 1928 which brought the work of masters like Eisenstein to US shores, Zimmermann reports that amateur film magazines such as *Amateur Movie Makers* enthused over avant-garde offerings:

The interest of amateur magazines during the following four to five years in silent experimental work constituted a reaction to Hollywood's technological developments through a re-assertion of the art of silent cinema They suggest an effort to expand and strengthen cinema as an art. With the

historical prerogative of amateurism as the guardian of art not contaminated by capitalism, it is not surprising that magazines like *Amateur Movie Makers* would promote experimental cinema. (1995, pp. 84-85)

This was in part a reply to the advent of sound, which placed new distance between the professional and the amateur. Recording sound was an aspect of Hollywood professionalism which amateurs could not hope to aspire to – thus it created new barriers between 16mm and 35mm film technologies. The ideology of amateurism concentrated on tenets of participation, experimentation and artistic freedom. Amateurism became the space in which art could be pursued for art's sake without the industrial imperatives of Hollywood. The spirit of experimentation even spread to professional Hollywood cinematographers, who found the 16mm medium a cost-effective 'notepad' for testing ambitious new shots, styles and special effects.

However, amateur practices and aesthetics were about to undergo a transformation. There was to be no place for home movies or idle chit-chat about aesthetics during World War II.

1940 – 1949: 16mm Goes Professional

This is a very significant period for the cultural study of amateur film and in particular, the cultural analysis of a particular amateur film gauge (16mm). World War II stimulated a number of shifts in the meanings, practices and aesthetics of amateur film which ultimately acted as a catalyst to propel 16mm from amateur to professional status.

The immediate effect of World War II was to orientate all production towards the war effort. As Allied governments recognised the value of film for the purposes of propaganda, recording battles, surveilling the enemy and training military personnel, it became standard military practice to attach a photographer/cinematographer to combat units. Since the need for mobility required lightweight, portable equipment with rugged reliability, this lined up nicely with the cartel's pre-war marketing attempts to present 16mm as a quasi-professional medium on a smaller format. The military embraced the 16mm format and production demand skyrocketed. Amateur filmstock disappeared from retail shelves as the American military, desperately short of 16mm cameras, urged private owners to sell their equipment to the Signal Corps (Blum, in

Zimmermann, 1995). Amateur filmmaking and 8 millimetre film took a back seat to the war while 16mm underwent a full militarisation.

The shortage of filmstock and equipment was also matched by a scarcity of trained cinematographers. Many Hollywood professionals produced films in the service of the military while studios themselves trained amateurs in the rudiments of newsreel cinematography. To some extent, the war worked to undermine the hierarchical distinction between professional and amateur cinematography as more amateurs than ever gained access to the means of production. Even worse, challenges were offered to dominant Hollywood technical practices as the military placed a new emphasis on the documentary style and its conventions – especially spontaneous, hand-held shooting. While these conventions remained subordinate to the constraints of the rigid narrated newsreel format, audiences developed a taste for the shaky hand-held camera which lent an air of immediacy to film footage - it simulated actual experience. Foreshadowing the era of cinema vérité, this approach became naturalised for the wartime newsreel audience, who continued to demand this new realism and bias towards location shooting in feature film work after the war.

If the imperatives of war were, somewhat paradoxically, encouraging amateur participation in filmmaking, then the subject matter was certainly limiting the scope of that participation. Propaganda and training films produced for the military did not offer much room for the expression of a personal or oppositional politics! Equally, debates about the role and practices of amateur filmmaking in amateur film magazines were disenfranchised as the unifying discourses of nationalism took precedence over ideologies of individualism expressed in hedonistic leisure pursuits.

Discussions about aesthetics seemed misplaced in the serious business of fighting a war. As ciné cameras emerged as yet another weapon of war which needed to be technologically superior to that of the enemy, discourse in amateur magazines turned from aesthetics to technology:

World War II altered the cultural position and discourse of amateur filmmaking; it revised its earlier aesthetic definition to a more technologically located identity. Scientific attributes – observation, analysis, recording, efficiency – expelled any lingering notions of composition, artistry, or individualism in amateur filmmaking. (Zimmermann, 1995, p. 107)

However, the legacy of World War II was significant. While Hollywood tried to reposition amateur hand-held technique as "an advanced and complicated expression of its technical prowess" (Zimmermann, 1995, p. 111), and Hollywood narrative films incorporated segments of archival 16mm war footage blown-up to 35mm, the originally sub-standard medium of 16mm had marked out new production territory – the realm of the documentary and educational/training film. Wartime newreels had placed the 16mm medium and documentary filmmaking conventions firmly in the public consciousness as professional practice. Fuelled by a post-war surplus of trained cinematographers, 16mm cameras and portable projection equipment, the conditions were present to establish an alternative system of commercial distribution and exhibition which did not rely on cinema spaces.

Just as the war had offered military cinematographers opportunities for appropriation of film for unofficial activities, the surplus of 16mm equipment stimulated the non-commercial work of experimental filmmakers and independent filmmaking co-operatives. However, while equipment may have been plentiful and affordable, different economics were at work in the manufacture and processing of 16mm film. As professional activity on the medium escalated with the advent of synchronous sound recording in the early 1950s, so did pricing. 16mm motion picture film no longer meant home movies - ideologically, technologically and economically it occupied a new place in the hierarchy of gauges. Only two gauges remained at the bottom of the ladder – Kodak's Standard 8mm and Pathé's 9.5mm. Kodak was about to begin a new corporate marketing initiative – an initiative designed to promote 8mm and remove any competition.

From Amateur to Professional – an Inevitable Cycle?

The cultural history of 16mm film serves as an interesting precursor to considering the cultural history of the Super 8 medium. The professionalisation of the 16mm medium and its commercial exploitation by Eastman Kodak as a dominant supplier and processor tends to confirm the primacy of ideologies of professionalism and the recirculation of established, approved production topics for presentation to mass markets. The ultimate form of control over a medium must be to incorporate it into a capitalist system whereby production reinforces dominant social ideologies and exhibition contributes to the gross domestic product.

The potential danger of any amateur medium is that it may develop in a direction which undermines the dominant ideologies of patriarchal capitalism, inhibiting the consumption of mass-produced goods or critiquing social structures underpinning that industrial system. Thus the imperative was for monopoly capital interests to frame amateur filmmaking within a self-serving system where the economic and ideological rules are clearly defined for each player and the process of consumption can continue in an orderly, seamless, fashion.

However, no system is free from the influence of unanticipated external forces which reshape the cultural role of a medium. In the case of 16mm, it could be argued that World War II created a potential for oppositional expression which could only be contained by establishing a commercial application for the medium outside of Hollywood narrative film. It is as though 16mm has worked through a cycle of amateurism (contained by discourses of pseudo-professionalism), semi-professional independent production (marked by oppositional discourses) and then full professionalisation into the corporate market (a process of incorporation).

What does this mean for Super 8? Is it the inevitable fate of any amateur medium that it must go through a cycle in which it is eventually fully recuperated by the interests of capital through professionalisation and incorporation into commercial activity? Does each new amateur medium (film or video) offer a site for this same contest to be played out over and over again?

This is a question to be borne in mind as we move on to the next chapter, *Popular Super 8: Home Movies (1965-1985)*. Here we locate the historical point of insertion of Super 8 into the discursive structures of amateur filmmaking and argue against the narrow interpretation of the deployment of this medium offered by Zimmermann. According to Zimmermann, this period represents a simple extension of her view of the cultural status of amateur film between 1950 and 1962, in which the dominance of a homogenised, formulaic approach to home movies "dissipated amateur film into an atrophied, impotent plaything, a toy to endlessly replay repressive ideologies" (1995, p. 142).

CHAPTER 3

'Popular' Super 8: Home Movies (1965-1985)

Orders for Super 8 equipment have far exceeded our expectations. Super 8 has received a very enthusiastic reception from both dealers and the public. We are struggling to catch up with your orders, please be patient, you can be sure we will do everything we can to fill your orders as quickly as possible. (Bell and Howell Dealer Bulletin, October 1965, in Kattelle, 2000, p. 212)

This chapter begins the task of looking at the three historical 'phases' of Super 8 which have been proposed in previous chapters. Each 'phase' is marked by the discursive construction of a preferred mode of textual production and consumption by dominant interests which have worked to structure meanings circulated through the cultural practice of Super 8 filmmaking. This chapter addresses what I have called 'Popular' Super 8 – that period of time between 1965 and 1985 when Super 8 production and consumption was firmly focussed on a mass market principally concerned with the cultural practices of documenting home and family. The next two chapters, '*Oppositional' Super 8 (1986-1995)*' and '*Indie' Super 8 (1996-2001)*' address different timeframes and suggest the domination of different modes of cultural and textual production. However, it is important to reiterate that while one type of cultural practice may have dominated a particular period, production and consumption in other modes has continued alongside the dominant practice - the history of Super 8 is a story of simultaneous and overlapping 'phases'.

This chapter charts the industrial progression from 'Standard' 8 to 'Super' 8 and investigates the discursive and marketing strategies which Eastman Kodak applied in order to preserve the *status quo* of the political economy of amateur filmmaking - a structure which it had already dominated for almost half a century. It then identifies three categories of domestic production and consumption operating during this period and argues that at least one of these offered a significant opportunity for "tactics" of resistance (de Certeau, 1984) in the practice of everyday life rather than simple affirmation of the existing dominant capitalist order. The chapter concludes by discussing the decline of Super 8 in the face of developing domestic video

technologies. However, let us begin at the beginning – an examination of the social, political and economic factors which led to the genesis of Super 8.

From 'Standard' 8 to 'Super' 8

The post-war economic boom fuelled a bonanza in consumption of home and leisure appliances as financial institutions "extended credit to the middle and lower classes, igniting an economy based on prolific spending rather than on thrift and saving" (Zimmermann, 1995, p. 114). This translated into an enthusiastic take-up of Standard 8 amateur movie equipment which reached a pinnacle of consumption in 1959. Amateur filmmaking in the 1950s was dominated by 'home movies', defined by Zimmermann as "private movie production of and by the nuclear family" (1995, p. 122). Home movie production was accompanied by a popular fascination with the vibrant colours of Kodachrome film and extraordinary advancements in Standard 8mm movie cameras – "by 1964, the [Standard] 8mm camera had reached a level of versatility and sophistication that had a profound effect on the fortunes of its parent, the 16mm camera" (Kattelle, 2000, p. 202). Cameras on the US market varied from relatively inexpensive, locally-made, point-and-shoot models to precisely engineered European and Japanese imports with semi-professional features, "costing anything from fifty to three hundred dollars" (Collins, 1994, p. 265).

While the Standard 8 camera had displaced 16mm in amateur production due its versatility and lower operating costs, its future looked far from rosy with the arrival of the 1960s. Kattelle notes the decline of American Standard 8 camera sales from "a high of 1,108,000 units in 1959 to 787,000 in 1961" (2000, p. 205). Kodak market research had attributed this to a public perception that movie-making was more expensive and difficult than still photography, and that customers were intimidated by a marketplace laden with excessively complex cameras which were cumbersome to load and operate (Stuart, in Kattelle, 2000, p. 205). However, sales of Kodak amateur film products were about to enjoy a new era of prosperity, as company researchers and engineers worked on a successor to the Standard 8mm format – 'Super' 8!

Standard 8 had been supplied in 25 foot rolls of 16mm film which were turned over mid-stream and run through the camera twice. In the past, Kodak had experimented with a number of single-run film-magazine systems which had come up against market resistance, probably largely because they involved buying a replacement camera which

yielded no further consumer benefits other than improved ease of loading! The genius of the Super 8 proposal was its status as a quasi-new medium. The 'redesign' of the 8mm width juggled the positions and sizes of both frame lines and perforations to offer a 50% greater image size in an idiot-proof, pre-packaged film cartridge which simply 'dropped' into the camera. Here was the first opportunity since Standard 8's displacement of 16mm to provide an incentive for the re-equipment of an existing amateur market.

Kattelle makes some astute observations about the self-interested marketing tactics of monopoly player Kodak in relation to the development and distribution of Super 8. Even in the development stage, the social, political and economic role of Super 8 is found to be disputed territory, and the subject of a number of contradictory and competing discourses. Although the technologically-driven imperative to re-consume the same cultural products on an enhanced 'replacement' medium is commonplace in contemporary consumer society – consider the shift from LP record to cassette to CD in the audio industry, and the similar effects of the shift from analogue to digital formats on home video - the proposal raised controversy at the time. Kattelle has noted the early resistance of amateur film magazines to the idea of a new format, especially Leendert Drukker's 1963 article in *Popular Photography* which asserted that "there was no room for two parallel miniature movie formats" (in Kattelle, 2000, p. 205). Ironically, Eastman Kodak chose to resist this claim at a 1964 Los Angeles SMPTE conference with a transparently devious response which, some 35 years later during the 'Indie' phase, may have actually boasted some claim to truth:

[Kodak researchers] Edwards and Chandler emphasised that the format being proposed was aimed at the commercial, industrial and education markets, where there was relatively little 8mm equipment in use, and that if it were generally accepted in these fields, then in all probability equipment for the amateur market would follow suit. (Kattelle, 2000, p. 206)

The introduction of Super 8 filmstock on June 6th, 1965 accompanied by low-level, easy-to-use cameras and projectors patently aimed at a mass consumer market was at odds with this statement by Edwards and Chandler. It followed a well-established path in Kodak's amateur marketing practices, practices which had their origin in still photography. Slater (1991) has emphasised Kodak's primary role as a producer and processor of filmstocks rather than cameras – "Eastman got into producing cameras

simply in order to sell *film* [author's emphasis] (p. 55)" and points out their vested interests in encouraging the efforts of rival camera manufacturers:

All Kodak's major cameras were launched with new film gauges from the original Kodak down to the 1980's (unsuccessful) disc camera. Any camera sold in the market, so long as it could use Kodak film, was not a competitor but an ally. On the other hand, Eastman fought a huge and successful legal battle in the 1890's to retain the patent, and the monopoly, on daylight loaded roll films. (p. 56)

As will be seen below, this pattern continued in the case of Super 8. New cameras accompanied the release of new stocks and Kodak attempted to limit the market competitiveness of Super 8 stocks produced under licence by rival manufacturers. Whether Edwards and Chandlers' response stemmed from complicity in the corporate marketing strategies of Eastman Kodak, or represented an oppositional discourse arising from the ever-present conflict between 'visionary' research and development people and (economically) 'sober' senior management, remains an issue open for debate. This will be taken up in further detail in Chapter 5.

Kodak's long-term and somewhat incestuous relationship with Bell and Howell (see previous chapter) came under great strain during the development of the Super 8 medium. Kodak had a standing policy of inviting other motion picture equipment manufacturers to briefings about products which it had in development. The invitation, however, could entail a fee of up to \$US10,000 (Kattelle, 2000, p. 105), but made technical information available to assist 'allies' in tooling up for equipment which would use Kodak films. In a (possibly) unintentional coup, Bell and Howell upstaged Kodak's planned spectacular launch of Super 8 by giving a preview of their equipment designed for the new medium in an issue of *Popular Photography* which went to the news-stands in May, 1965 – one month earlier than Kodak's intended release date! Interviewing the journalist responsible for the article, Kattelle found that Kodak senior management had responded with hostility – "harsh words were exchanged with *Popular Photography's* publisher, threats of withdrawing advertising were made" (2000, p. 207).

The arrival of Super 8, as forecast by Drukker (in Kattelle, above), eventually signed the death warrant for Standard 8 equipment. Cameras disappeared from the market within 3-5 years of the introduction of Super 8, and Standard 8 projectors slipped into redundancy as new dual-gauge machines entered the market promising convenience,

flexibility and improved lamp brightness. However, the medium itself persisted somewhat longer, due perhaps to three factors. Firstly, a hard core of users (including myself) continued to shoot on the medium. Secondly, the 'dual' perforation structure of Standard 8 film also permitted it to be shot in 16mm cameras. Lastly, as will be seen below, it remained a favoured format for the home projection of reduction-printed commercial releases. Kodak finally withdrew Standard 8 film from sale in 1991, almost sixty years after its initial release on the market.

Although only Bell and Howell initially took the gamble to release Super 8 equipment alongside Eastman Kodak, the market success of the medium soon galvanised other manufacturers into action. Kattelle notes that by December, 1965 "there were 13 manufacturers, offering 30 different Super 8 models. Of these 13 companies, seven were U.S., the balance were foreign" (2000, p. 212). The diversity of models on offer, and the extraordinary price range offered within that diversity, mirrored the market situation for 1950s amateur filmmaking, creating what Zimmermann has identified as "a technological class structure defined by cost, technical control, and film gauge" (1995, p. 119).

A Political Economy of the Super 8 User

Both Zimmermann and Kattelle have noted an American trend towards servicing the "low end" of the amateur motion picture market which began in the 1950s. A new policy of pursuing mass-market sales through chains of large suburban retail stores rather than traditional specialty camera shops necessitated product design driven primarily by price. Both Eastman Kodak and Bell and Howell embraced the principle of developing a range of low-cost, automated cameras which addressed the lower to middle-income market. This strategy of "trading down" (Zimmermann, 1995) initially left the market for more sophisticated cameras offering manual control to German and Swiss manufacturers. Their heritage of producing expensive, hand-assembled, technologically-advanced equipment for the European upper-class imbued their products with a reputation for superior finish, precision and craftsmanship – attributes of professional excellence. For Zimmermann, this laid the foundation for a hierarchy of amateurism based on an economy of technical control:

Manipulation of technology, higher cost, and technical complexity denoted professionalism, and conversely, ease of operation, lower cost, and

simplicity defined amateurism the demarcation between professional and amateur here was almost exclusively financial, if not illusory: consumers could possess the trappings of professionalism through purchasing an expensive camera. (1995, pp. 118-119)

Favourable market conditions for imports in the late 1950s saw European and Japanese manufacturers begin to dominate the market at both ends of the scale, challenging the previous domination of American manufacturing in the domestic amateur motion picture market. Zimmermann (1995) is critical of the American response to this situation, which she sees as promoting a "dumbing-down" of amateur film practice:

In response to foreign competition, [American] camera operation became increasingly more simple. This hierarchy based on technical control eventually dissolved into a spontaneous form of amateurism, because it required minimal technical manipulation and control. (pp. 119-120)

A hierarchy based on technical control certainly extended into the initial phase of Super 8 as point-and-shoot cameras became even cheaper and easier to use, and the upper end of the market began to sport ever-more sophisticated 'professional' features at alarmingly high prices. Kattelle notes that "by the close of 1978, there were 16 manufacturers offering over 70 models of Super 8 sound cameras ... ranging in price from \$200 to over \$2000" (2000, p. 239). The most exclusive Super 8 equipment now cost 10 times the price of the most basic model compared to Collins 1950's analysis of Standard 8 equipment, where premium equipment was only 6 times the cost of the most basic unit (Collins, 1994, p. 265).

Zimmermann found that the effect of Kodak's discursive and economic control of the realm of amateur film was to re-affirm the primacy of the professional-amateur divide, subordinating amateur filmmakers to one of two relations of consumption. Home movies are seen to represent part of the insidious 'professionalisation' of private life where the activities of leisure time become activities of consumption taking place in a private, rather than communal sphere. Thus, the 'spontaneous' home movie amateur becomes the 'unthinking' amateur, urged by mass product advertising and Kodak literature to record the primacy of the family unit in a politically benign act of leisure-based consumption. At the other end of the scale, the upwardly-mobile and financially more affluent consumer is disarmed through discourses which encourage the

fetishisation of technology and the mimicking of Hollywood spectacles to the exclusion of any other political or aesthetic possibilities. Zimmermann sees this as part of a set of hegemonic tactics which have worked over time to quarantine the democratic potential of amateur film as a "voice for and of the people":

Amateur film progressed from an economic definition to an aesthetic deviation to a social function. Its definition narrowed from a utopian hope of upward mobility to a consumer practice zone for perfecting Hollywood pictorial composition and narrative techniques to a nonserious, leisure-time activity bolstering family solidarity and consumption. (1995, p. 145)

From this convenient dismissal of amateur filmmaking in the period 1950-1962, Zimmermann finds it a small step to advance to a discussion of the cultural status of amateur video. Super 8 gets but a cursory reference as an artistic opportunity for avant-garde filmmakers to exploit home movie style as "a formal manifestation of a spontaneous, untampered form of filmmaking" (1995, p. 146) before its video successor reasserts the dominance of familialism through the introduction of "camcorders [which] erase home movie history as a technology too intrusive and too aesthetically complicated" (1995, p. 150).

I find this an extraordinary dismissal of a highly significant era in amateur film, and also feel that it represents an unexpected narrowing of the boundaries of amateur endeavour. Amateur production on Super 8 between 1965 and 1985 is significant, and since then has certainly not ceased with the advent of video technology. What is even more remiss about Zimmermann's stance is that America is at the centre of contemporary Super 8 culture. While one may equate the affluence of the United States with the early availability of new technologies and the potential to take them up faster, and the lower economic status of other world regions with a tendency to maintain older technologies, the persistence of Super 8 today as a global phenomenon has largely been American-led. It is supported by a contemporary cultural ethos which had its earliest expression in the U.S. magazine, *Super 8 Filmmaker*, first published in 1972 (see Chapter 5 for a fuller discussion). Unlike other magazines of the period, this publication focussed entirely on the Super 8 medium and was described by Kattelle as:

by and for the young 'age of Aquarius' crowd – no Wall Street tycoon filming his trip nor dad shooting baby's first footsteps. The readers were presumed to be serious and avant-garde, pushing the envelope on the new

medium. A 1977 photo of the staff shows no-one apparently over 35. (2000, p. 259)

While Kattelle remains circumspect about the virtues of the magazine – “on careful examination one sees that the advice offered the reader was not so different from that given in the older magazines” (2000, p. 260), it is not technical advice which sets this magazine apart from other amateur filmmaking publications, but rather its discursive construction of Super 8 as ‘the’ medium for independent (‘indie’) production. Amateur filmmaking magazines of the period offer some useful insights into how Super 8 was constructed and deployed in the context of a discursive and economic framework dominated by monopoly supplier Eastman Kodak, and it is to ‘users’ of Super 8 that we now turn our attention.

Home Movies: Categories of Production and Consumption

As a contribution to this chapter, which is concerned with home movies as the dominant mode of textual production between 1965 and 1985, Zimmermann has laid some useful foundations. However, as will be argued later, she has perhaps also offered some counter-productive restrictions in the case of the chapters to follow. It seems to me that a typology of home movies ought to recognise at least three categories of production and/or consumption. The first is the quintessential home movie, a category which emphasises family-oriented texts documenting home activities and family excursions regardless of quality of equipment, mastery of narrative, film language or cinematic technique. The second category is also about production and consumption, but relates to the efforts of individuals or community groups to capture public events, performances and happenings which represent the maker’s affiliation with groups and activities outside the narrower sphere of the family. Sherman (1998) has referred to this kind of cultural production as ‘folkloric film’. The final category to be considered here is concerned entirely with consumption. It is that of the viewer/collector, whose main apparatus has been a Super 8 projector rather than a camera. A forerunner of contemporary VCR and DVD culture, this is about the purchase and/or rental of 35mm commercial films reduction-printed to Super 8 for consumption in the home.

As mentioned above, sales literature, how-to-do-it books and amateur filmmaking magazines of the period are valuable research materials for this project. The absence

of any periodicals dealing with amateur filmmaking in Australia during this period tells the story of a relatively small consumer market informed by American and British discourses on amateur filmmaking. With the exception of a regular column in *Australian Photography*, Australian Super 8 filmmakers read imported magazines such as *Movie Maker* and *Film Making* (from the U.K.) and the aforementioned U.S. publication, *Super 8 Filmmaker*. American photography magazines available in Australia such as *Popular Photography* and *Petersen's Photographic* also featured articles on Super 8. It was not until 1995 that Australia had its first magazine devoted to amateur filmmaking, Melbourne-based Rodney Bourke's self-published *The 8mm Film Guide*. Kodak's major U.S. publications on home movie making, *How to Make Good Home Movies* (1966) and *Home Movies Made Easy* (1970) were also freely available in Australia. Material from all these sources provide a useful starting point for considering the deployment of Super 8 within the three categories identified above.

Home Movies and the Cultural Practice of Everyday Life

Hirsch (1997) has noted the importance of domestic image-making technologies for the recording of family histories:

Photography quickly became the family's primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation – the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated, by which the family's story would henceforth be told. (p. 7)

Home movies have certainly not displaced the primary role of the photograph or family album in this area. The family album is, in effect, an edited assembly of still images from a wide range of eras and events – an ordered collection. The difficulty of accessing home movies (the ritual of projection) and their concentration on perhaps just one or two events per reel suggests home movies' role as an adjunct to the family album rather than as a replacement for it.

Nonetheless, familial movie-making was certainly part of the cultural practice of everyday life between 1965 and 1985. Whether these practices of consumption, production and reception represented capitulation to the dominant order of things, or offered some opportunity for "tactics" of resistance (de Certeau, 1984), is a contentious issue. The social function of home movies and its close relative, domestic photography,

in reinforcing ideologies of familialism and consumption has been pointed out by a number of theorists (Bourdieu 1990; Hartley, 1992; Hirsch 1997; Zimmermann 1995; Slater 1991; Holland 1997). The thrust of this argument is that the subjects of snapshot photography and home movies become dictated by 'approved' occasions which reveal the most positive aspects of family life, captured by automated cameras which require little more than a point-and-shoot mentality on the part of the user. Slater (1991) summarises what he sees as the ideological bottom-line of this cultural practice – "Simply and reliably, the snapshot camera would reproduce the right family" (p. 59).

Articles in *Movie Maker*, *Film Making* and *Super 8 Filmmaker*, and the subject matter of Kodak how-to-books, *How to Make Good Home Movies* and *Home Movies Made Easy* certainly lend support to this argument. Subjects such as weddings, birthdays, picnics, home activities and holidays come to the fore, with plenty of practical advice for using the camera. Analysis also reveals an obsession with the technical codes of professional (Hollywood) production, especially storyboarding, shot sizing, and continuity. Sample storyboards are provided in both Kodak books - including "War in the Snow, Our Honeymoon at Niagara, Laura's Seventh Birthday, Getting to the Zoo and A Day at Disneyland" (*How to Make Good Home Movies*, 1966) and became an obsession with *Film Making* in 1970s issues, as readers' ideas were converted into storyboards on a monthly basis.

Holland, in a response to Slater (1991), has resisted the suggestion that home photography is an automated, empty process without creative, ideological or social merit:

Selecting, framing and achieving the content of a photographic image was now a possibility for those who would not otherwise have had either the time, the money or the inclination to engage in the complex processes of amateur photography. producing joke pictures and clowning in front of the lens are activities which have turned taking pictures into a pastime that secures friendship and insists on interaction between photographer and subject. This is collaboration in 'manipulating the tools of representation and meaning', even when it's just for fun. (1997, p. 128)

Slater himself acknowledges the pleasures of domestic photography:

I am a snapshooter: I photograph my children, holidays, events that I share with the various communities of which I am a part. When I began to relax my critical conscience somewhat, I found this photography made me quite happy in a way that more ambitious aesthetic and political relations to my camera often did not. I know what I am doing, I know where photographing and showing photographs *fits* [author's emphasis] into my everyday life. (Slater, 1991, p. 49)

Zimmermann, in asserting that familial home movie "discourses and practices impeded amateur access into other more significant forms of media production" (1995, p.121) in a vote of support for the dominant capitalist order, is perhaps a little too dismissive of the role of home movies in providing a sense of personal identity and assisting in making sense of life in a social environment dominated by the institution of the family. Marschessault (1996) points to the specificity of the home movie experience, where "spectatorial engagement with one's own home movies is intensely personal and recognition is idiosyncratic even within or perhaps especially within families" (p. 423). This ties in well with Holland's distinction between the "reader" and "user" of home photographs:

Users bring to the images a wealth of surrounding knowledge. Their private pictures are part of the complex network of memories and meanings with which they make sense of their daily lives. For readers, on the other hand, a hazy snapshot or a portrait from the 1950s is a mysterious text whose meanings must be teased out in an act of decoding or historical detective work. Users of personal pictures have access to the world in which they make sense; readers must translate those private meanings into a more public realm. (p. 107)

These observations apply equally well to home movies. Home movies which are seen by their makers, participants, and/or close friends and relatives are supplemented by privileged extra-textual knowledge which affects the meanings and pleasures of reception. Although Zimmermann has noted the imperative of professionalism in home movies to conform with Hollywood codes of representation in yet another case of professionalisation of the private sphere, she has also conceded amateur resistance to these discourses of how-to-books and amateur filmmaking magazines. 'Firehosing' (spontaneous panning and zooming) of the camera and lack of editing in home movies

give testimony of a grass-roots amateur filmmaker who has read little more than the camera's operating manual and is in a relationship of experimentation with the camera.

Gunter (1976) saw this as the perfect starting point for the medium – “[Super] 8mm is a medium that began in the hands of the amateur. Its language is simplicity, its manner spontaneous, its usage as creative as its user” (p. 85). The exhortations of Kodak how-to-books and amateur filmmaking magazines to mimic Hollywood production techniques and plan for continuity have been somewhat lost on a mass filmmaking community which has ignored those texts and been more interested in passive documentation rather than active construction. Tedious cinema-verité home movies make sense because audiences are able to contextualise the experience through both spoken and unspoken meta-commentary. Significantly, Eastman Kodak both recognised and promoted this consumer technical disengagement with the introduction of its XL (existing light) camera range in 1971. Release of the camera coincided with the introduction of a new filmstock designed to capture images in the lowest levels of light without additional sources of lighting.

The next level of engagement implied a desire to interact with the filmic process to a greater degree – and necessarily required more equipment. Tierney (1990) speaks of his father's fascination with the home movie camera:

My dad ended up going crazy with that thing. For the next 15 years, he would shoot every Christmas, every camping trip, every R-rated Halloween party. He captured my walk to the bus stop on my first day of school he added blazing lights, bought an editor and splicer. He became a one-man production team, the *auteur* of one of America's smallest, most personal cinemas. (p. 50)

Home movie-making is personal cinema which takes the family as its subject. As Holland points out, “the equation between ‘the family’ and private experience is too easily made and excludes too much” (1997, p. 106). The pleasures of production for the more elevated ‘home auteur’ include elements which are related to craft as well as subject, which correspond, in Holland's terms, to the desire for self-gratification:

In Western urban culture it is as *individuals* that people have come to experience themselves, independently of their role as family members the twentieth-century consumer-led economy has shifted these new

individuals away from a culture based on work and self-discipline to one based on libidinous gratification which encourages us all to *identify* our pleasures in order to develop and refine them. (pp. 108-109)

As discussed in Chapter 2, the more masculine leisure-pursuit of the 'serious amateur' in photographic and cinematographic practice has been marked by the use of more expensive equipment offering greater technical control over the process of image-making, greater concern with aesthetics (especially pictorialism) and a support network of organizations, competitions and literature (Slater 1991; Holland 1997; Zimmermann 1995). For Zimmermann (1995) and Slater (1991), the 'serious amateur' is a vexed category likely to combine familial subjects with adulation (not necessarily mastery) of apparatus and worship of Hollywood technical effects to the exclusion of more political possibilities.

Amateur-filmmaking magazines offered vicarious participation in the world of the 'serious amateur' with a proliferation of articles on every conceivable aspect of technical control including lighting, recording sound, editing, animation, use of tripods, titling and projection. These were interwoven with endless reviews of new products which promised to deliver ever-more professional results at a price. U.K. magazine *Film Making*, harking back to the early days of the amateur as hobbyist-inventor, offered improbable articles on making your own equipment. The June 1973 issue invited readers to build their own automated film processor, which was followed up in September, 1974 with an article dedicated to constructing your own underwater camera housing! These recipes for potential disaster, however, lived among a more significant aspect of Super 8 culture which found its expression in U.K. magazines *Film Making* and *Movie Maker*— the ciné club scene.

Film Making, and especially *Movie Maker*, were active participants in the U.K. ciné club scene, reporting on members' productions and festival events. This was a culture which transcended personal filmmaking within the familial context, and offered the possibilities of group production work organised along the lines of professional Hollywood crews. Finished films, often fictional dramatic narratives scripted by club members, were exhibited through an independent system of distribution involving other clubs and festivals. In Zimmermann's terms, this returned to an earlier definition of amateurism where "the discursive relations of amateur film promoted private life as a place where one could practice skills and techniques that would aid advancement into commercial gain" (1995, p. 135). However, whether as a training ground for aspiring

professionals, or as a system of production and exhibition existing outside dominant Hollywood structures, this is a different category of production and reception of amateur film which falls outside the scope of home movies. This falls into the bounds of what I have called 'Indie' Super 8 and will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Familial home movies remain a genre of amateur film which is very specific to a point-in-time audience whose readings of films are informed by extra-textual knowledge of contexts and events. The imperfect institution of the family is a companion to the imperfect institution of consumption-based trans-national capitalism. Whether you see the home movie as a friend of the family or a friend of capitalism depends on where you sit. However, home movies, contrary to Zimmermann, are not all about the backyard – they are as much about looking 'out' as looking 'in', and may well encompass wider cultural aspects. These 'away-from-home' movies take on the attributes of what Sherman (1998) has described as 'folkloric films'.

Folkloric Home Movies

Whether captured by chance on a family outing, or the deliberate action of a member of a community group documenting a group activity, films about community events, performances and happenings document our own cultural history – the folklore of our times. A 1978 article by *Film Making* writer Gerald McKee discusses an up-coming BBC television series entitled *Caught in Time*, a story of life in the 1920s and 1930s based almost entirely on amateur home movie footage. McKee notes the power of home movie footage, "primarily because the domestic camera has recorded the small facts of everyday life ignored by the professionals", which he finds to be a "far more revealing picture of ordinary family life than is possible with any other medium" (1978, p. 39). Of course, home movies are no stranger to the television screen – consider the famous example of the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination and more recently on home video, the Rodney King beating. In Australia too, there has been an increasing trend to commission commercial documentary films which are based on amateur home movie footage. Recent examples include Film Australia's series, *Colour of War – The Anzacs*, compiled from hours of Standard 8, Super 8 and 16mm footage made available by ex-servicemen and SBS' *Homemade History*, a 13 episode series examining people's lives through commentary on their own home movie footage.

Home movies constitute a valuable part of cultural histories. A recent initiative to begin a home movie archive in Ontario, Canada responds to McKee's comments above. Arch: a founders Tremblay and Fiege enthuse over their project:

These films document history in a way that no other medium can. They reveal important information about our culture and its customs, about historical events and figures, labour and leisure activities, the natural and urban landscapes in which we live, modes of transportation, fashion, religion, and the ways in which we interact and communicate with one another. They also provide us with great insight into the medium [amateur film] itself and how it influenced the ways in which filmmakers recorded the world around them (1994, p. 33)

Tremblay and Fiege also note the extraordinary way in which early home movies place the viewer within their discourse – “the smiles, the gestures, they were addressed to us. Time had been transcended as we found ourselves participating in their reality” (1994, p. 33). *Places of Memory*, a 1997 installation piece by Victorian filmmaker Virginia Hillyard featuring home movies embraced the same concept of revealing suburban life through self-documentation.

Self-documentation is seen as a preferred mode of production by cultural anthropologist/folklorist Sharon Sherman in her 1998 book, *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video and Culture*. Although much of her book is concerned with methodologies for construction and analysis of folkloric films, which “combine the goal of the documentary to record unstaged events with the goal of the ethno-documentary to provide information about culture” (p. 63), Sherman is supportive of the ‘inside-out’ approach of the folkloric home movie which incorporates both the personal and the familial. Many home movies document the formal subject matter of folkloric films, including “a wide range of traditional behaviour, from rituals, ceremonies, folk art and material culture to games, sayings and songs” (Sherman, 1998, p. 63). The cultural value of these texts is enhanced by the activities of home movie makers in documenting both their own everyday existence as well as (through travel films) the behaviour of other cultures.

Hollywood in the Home: From Participation to Capitulation

The modern suburban video library had its antecedents in Pathé's 9.5mm and Kodak's 16mm Kodascope film libraries of the early 1920s. Both organizations also offered a sales catalogue of commercial features and documentaries which had been reduction-printed from larger professional formats. Super 8 film libraries and sales catalogues were preceded by a long history of Standard 8 reduction-prints dating back to the early 1930s. For Standard 8 film collectors, the advent of Super 8 led to an unexpected redundancy crisis. How could a new gauge be introduced which was actually produced in the same 8mm width? Existing private collections were preserved through the introduction of dual gauge projectors, a principle similar to today's double video decks which play both VHS and DVD formats. This satisfied both Kodak's desire for additional profits and allowed the consumer to avoid home screenings on multiple projectors.

Film libraries in Australia tended to be government-sponsored concerns attached to regular libraries. A significant survivor of this era is Melbourne's National Film and Video Lending Library (now part of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image), which still provides a loan service for 16mm prints. The U.K. experience was somewhat different. In addition to government sponsored organizations, the U.K. scene in the 1960s and 1970s featured a number of private rental libraries listing Standard 8 and Super 8 films, including Derann Film Services of West Midlands, which survives today as a seller of both video and Super 8 releases of commercial films. The American library experience was somewhat different. Rental libraries existed for the 16mm format, but did not adopt Standard 8, which was exclusively a sales format in that country (Jones, 1974, p. 40).

The arrival of Super 8 brought some unforeseen issues to film library operators and stimulated a sales, rather than a rental culture. The robustness of 16mm library films lent themselves to long working lives, but the expense of purchasing the larger format discouraged a sales culture. Standard 8 reduced material costs, but the limited reel capacity of domestic projectors encouraged a condensed, 'digest' presentation on a single reel which both reduced purchase price and the amount of film handling for consumers. Super 8, however, proved to be a disappointing rental format as pointed out by Roy Jones in a 1974 article for the U.K. magazine *Film Making*:

The word 'Super' is grossly overstated as most libraries would prefer to re-name it – 'Super easily damaged 8mm'! This derived from the fact that a

Super 8 print has a library usage life-expectancy of two years against some seven years obtained from the so-called inferior Standard 8mm. (p. 40)

Ascerbic *Movie Maker* columnist Ivan Watson attributed the shorter working life of Super 8 to Kodak's redesign of the 8mm width – "those pinpricks ('laughingly called sprocket holes') so perilously near to the edge of the film stand up to about as much wear as a chiffon battledress in a street riot" (1974, p. 364). The net result of this was to push Super 8 reduction prints towards sales and prolong the life of Standard 8 as both a rental and sales medium in the UK.

A feature of Derann advertisements in *Movie Maker* between 1975 and 1976 is the breadth of titles offered from the annals of film history, from shorts to full-length programmes in the genres of documentary, travelogue, newsreel, animation and drama. As an independent distributor, Derann drew on a huge variety of sources including Rank, EMI, Pathé, Walt Disney, Movietone News, Walton, Republic, 20th Century Fox, Warner Bros, Paramount and Columbia. Every taste appeared to be catered for - from children's cartoons to adult soft porn.

Television, unlike commercial cinema, has demonstrated a willingness to trot out old features during periods of low-rating viewing, but early silent films, documentaries and newsreels are rarely afforded air-time. The now-defunct independent American distributor Blackhawk Films provides an interesting example of the re-production and re-marketing of classic films on the Super 8 medium. William Wind, writing for *Super 8 Filmmaker*, described Blackhawk's aggressive and committed approach to acquiring and reproducing classics of the silent cinema directed by film pioneers such as D.W. Griffith, Mack Sennett, Hal Roach, Georges Méliès and Charlie Chaplin in the face of studio indifference:

For reasons that defy understanding, many of the major Hollywood studios have been willing to let their old films rot in their vaults rather than licence them for non-theatrical distribution. Lately, however, the success of Super 8 has been bringing them around. Some of Blackhawk's licenses ... have given them the rights to additional Laurel and Hardy Films, Little Rascals films, Griffith films, and some early Paramount short subjects. (1974, p. 36)

Additionally, Blackhawk acquired titles from private collectors which had been lost over time by originating studios, contributing to the preservation of film history through its

restoration practices and relationship with the American Film Institute. Significantly, Wind notes, in closing, the “growth and popularisation of film collecting, home movie entertainment and mail-order distribution” (1974, p. 39). This seems to foreshadow a shift in consumer relations towards the end of the era of ‘Popular’ Super 8 – from active participation (movie-making) to passive reception (movie-viewing). For Australian consumers of Super 8 reduction-prints, American distribution dominated mail-order houses and digests of (then) recent features were to be found in camera stores and major retail chain outlets.

The rise of film collecting on Super 8, which operated side by side with video collecting from about 1975, could be seen as a form of total capitulation to the codes of Hollywood cinema. Significantly, the long-running ‘Home Movies’ column in *Super 8 Filmmaker* was displaced by “Sneak Preview – Reviews and Listings of Super-8 and Videotape Releases for Home Viewing” in the July/August issue of 1979. Active engagement with the discourses of production was displaced by passive affirmation of the Hollywood model - as home movies meant spectatorship rather than authorship. The making of home movies (as even just a social function in Zimmermann’s terms) was replaced by viewing of movies in the home as the ultimate low-impact leisure activity - except when out shopping for more Super 8 or video releases, of course! This has resonance with Nichols’ concept of “tele-participation” in which the watching of Reality TV absolves the armchair viewer of any need for political action in the real world – “social participation dissolves into tele-participation” (1994, p. 54).

Despite the evolution of a home video collecting culture along similar lines of consumption, some significant differences remain between modes of reception on Super 8 and video. While Super 8 releases offered mainly cut-down versions of features (due to cost), video was able to provide the whole feature easily and eventually, far more economically. While the practice of home video-makers resulted in undisciplined shooting of long hours of tape which defied any attempt or desire to edit it, home video releases liberated consumers from the disturbing truncation of narrative sense offered by Super 8 ‘digests’, fulfilling (in Zimmermann’s terms) the discursive imperative for amateur worship of the sacred codes of Classic Hollywood Realism. However, until the recent advent of home video projectors, Super 8 has continued to retain the aura of the cinematic occasion, with its big-screen presentation and rituals of mechanical projection. That is what has kept distribution of Super 8 features alive at places like the U.K.’s Derann Film Services.

Rise and Fall: Super 8 Goes Underground

The Super 8 scene from 1965 to 1985 was dominated by Eastman Kodak as a monopoly supplier who dictated the type and range of products available as well as the rules for consuming them. Other manufacturers sought licenses to produce Super 8 cameras and films, an inevitability under national anti-trust laws, but this had little impact on the organization which had dominated the amateur film market almost from its beginnings. What did have an impact on the amateur film market was the arrival of home video. Goldsmith (in Kattelle, 2000) provides statistics which heralded the impact of the new, "user-friendly" technology:

By 1981, the sales of Super 8 cameras had dropped to about 200,000 units per year, from 600,000 in 1977, while video camera shipments had risen to 200,000. By 1984, an estimated one million [video] units were in use. (p. 247)

By 1982 production of all Super 8 cameras had ceased. As Tierney rather wistfully put it - "30 million [home] cinemas flickered out, prices for cameras plummeted, companies went bankrupt and surpluses grew as Bell & Howell, Minolta, Canon and the rest couldn't stop making them fast enough" (1990, p. 50). However, the legacy of 'Popular' Super 8 were the millions of Super 8 cameras which had permeated through the global marketplace and now began to collect dust in closets as their owners migrated to the video camcorder.

The virtues of the camcorder spoke to the mass consumer, but struggled to find favour with cash-strapped film artists whose very medium of expression needed to articulate a politics of opposition. As the 1980s rolled on, the Australian avant-garde movement, invested with the 1960s counter-culture values of New American Cinema, embraced Super 8 film as the medium of its times. As Super 8 products were withdrawn from the marketplace and Super 8 support resources declined, Australian Super 8 went underground and joined a global 'resistance' movement dedicated to the promotion of a Super 8 counter-culture.

CHAPTER 4

'Oppositional' Super 8 – Super 8 Goes Underground (1986-1995)

As an artist of the moving image I am attracted to Super 8's flexibility, affordability and the potential this holds for subversions in the hands of the unanointed though there are what I would describe as colonising forces in the arts that see Super 8 as increasingly irrelevant. So let it pop up along with an "attitude", with the values it nourishes, slap bang in the middle of those media that ignore it and/or are supposed to have supplanted the gauge. It interests me to show up and break such conservative ignorance cloaked in the surface of the "new", to show up and debunk a politics of exclusion.
(de Bruyn, 1997, p. 1)

The above statement by Melbourne Super 8 Film Group member Dirk de Bruyn offers a strong insight into the dominant cultural practice of Super 8 filmmaking in Australia after the decline of its primary role of archiving the family. Super 8's displacement by home video in the domestic market coincided with attempts by Eastman Kodak in the early 1980s to be a leader and innovator in video technology (Kattelle, 2000). For Eastman Kodak, Super 8 increasingly represented a redundant product line with minimal financial viability which it continued to produce under statutory obligations to consumers who had not yet shifted to home video. This period is characterised by a 'wall of silence' on the part of Kodak, whose reluctance to construct any further discourse around Super 8 is probably best understood as being underpinned by a desire for its quiet demise with a 'minimum of fuss'!

However, Super 8's disconnection from the popular milieu and consignment to the margins left it as a medium ripe for appropriation and re-contextualisation. This chapter looks at the reasons why Australian avant-garde, experimental, underground and independent filmmakers adopted Super 8, and the strategies by which it was kept alive in an era of minimal support from both Kodak and other key production support services. It is argued that the dominant cultural practices of Super 8 production and consumption in this era fostered specific discourses on the aesthetics, politics and economics of Super 8 production which contributed to the construction of an aesthetic

mythology about the 'essential character' (Carroll, 1996) of the Super 8 medium. This 'essential character' is seen to have its historical origins in the New American Cinema's discursive construction of Standard 8 in the 1950s. Even today, it is responsible for generating a set of meanings which continue to be invoked in the reception of contemporary Super 8 texts. The 'essential character' of Super 8 as an historically-located construct is later seen to be subject to some revision as we progress to 'Indie' Super 8 in the next chapter.

It is further argued that Australian Super 8 culture in this period, particularly through the agency of the Melbourne Super 8 Film Group (1986-2001), could be seen to be at the centre of a wider underground global culture – a culture sustained by cottage industries and support networks using resources such as the internet to recruit members and communicate information. The Melbourne Super 8 Film Group's internal newsletter, *Super Eight*, provides important material for a case study of the group with its lively discussion of Super 8 films and Super 8 culture in general. The second case study presented in this chapter is that of the Pandora's Box Super 8 Film Festival (1992-), an event rather than a filmmaker group. Study of the latter (continuing) Super 8 phenomenon maps the influence of 'Indie' filmmaking on Super 8 practices, and looks at how Pandora's Box has incorporated Super 8 aesthetics into a specific hybridised form of independent cinema, a form which continues to have resonance with both filmmakers and audiences in the digital age. The chapter concludes with the rise of 'Indie' Super 8, marking the beginning of the medium's popular re-appropriation and incorporation by mainstream cinema.

This account of the cultural history of Australian Super 8 filmmaking between 1986 and 1995 needs to be prefaced by a discussion of two important starting points. The first is an explanation of what is meant by the categories of avant-garde, experimental, underground and (traditional) independent filmmaking – categories which I have at various times labelled collectively as 'radical', 'alternative' or 'oppositional' cinema. The second task is to contextualise this new appropriation of Super 8 by establishing something of the history of avant-garde, experimental, underground and (traditional) independent filmmaking with specific reference to the Australian environment.

Avant-Garde, Experimental, Underground and Independent Cinema

If, as Zimmermann (1995) claims, home movies have simply propped up the dominant order by deflecting production into trivial activity which affirms the primacy of Hollywood, familialism and consumption, then underground, avant-garde and experimental filmmaking have presented themselves collectively as a radical critique of mainstream cinema – an alternative, oppositional form of production challenging 'normal' audience expectations and drawing attention to the ideology and apparatus of mainstream production and distribution. The common radical aims of these branches of alternative production have led to a tendency to view them as overlapping and even interchangeable, but Sobchack and Sobchak suggest that each can be seen to have a particular meaning and emphasis:

Experimental film ... suggests a film made for the purposes of trying out some new technique, some new aesthetic, some new structure, or some new apparatus *avant-garde film* ... implies that the film is ahead of its time, in the forefront of an aesthetic movement, that it is not a film concerned with traditional means of communicating traditional content. And the term *underground film* seems given to films that are potentially shocking to traditional moral and aesthetic values, films that are subversive in their intent and effect. (1987, p. 384)

While these categories do overlap in trying to describe many examples of the genre, they are (as will be seen below) still useful as singular entities in understanding the historical development of an alternative cinema. Australian Super 8 culture in the early 1980s embraced all of these approaches, together with the then (and now) somewhat ambiguous category of 'independent filmmaking'. 'Traditional' independent filmmaking, defined by Sobchack and Sobchack as being about "individual artists making films not for gain, but for personal expression, specifically making films that would not be suitable for mainstream theatrical release" (1987, p. 381) seems initially to offer an 'umbrella' category for avant-garde, experimental and underground film. However, unlike the other three categories, independent filmmaking does not necessarily imply a subversion of cinematic form and content – films could certainly make use of more conventional forms, such as short drama and documentary, and still not be intended for mainstream theatrical release. The radical potential of independent filmmaking exists in its desire to communicate with an audience outside of normal distribution channels and to determine its own subject matter and authorial position – 'independent' of the politics

of funding bodies and the restrictive production practices of large, hierarchically-organised, professional crews. For this reason I have chosen to include traditional independent filmmaking in the Super 8 medium in my meta-category of radical, alternative or oppositional Super 8.

As Sobchack and Sobchack have noted, the meaning of 'independent' has shifted with the passage of time, so that "today, the term is frequently applied to a group of films and filmmakers with exactly the opposite aspirations" (1987, p. 381). I prefer to think of this more mainstream approach to filmmaking as 'indie' production, with its connotations of aspiring commercial filmmakers seeking to establish professional credentials as a means of entering the industry. Attention is often sought through producing low or no-budget short popular drama for exhibition on the international festival circuit as a means of progressing to feature film production. The next chapter, *Indie Super 8 (1996-2001)*, examines the appropriation of Super 8 to support the 1990s ideological construct of 'anyone can make it' independent filmmaking.

Oppositional, Radical or Alternative Super 8 - Antecedents

The declining value of secondhand Super 8 equipment during the early 1980s made it more accessible to the (ever) cash-strapped Australian arts community, and a growing number of artists and filmmakers began to work in the medium. The desire to unite these filmmakers and to provide a venue for both Super 8 screenings and commentary provided an impetus for the formation of what were probably Australia's two most significant Super 8 groups. Both resided on the eastern seaboard - the Sydney Super 8 Group was formed in 1980 and absorbed into the Sydney Intermedia Network in 1990. The Melbourne Super 8 Film Group, founded by local filmmaker Bill Mousoulis in 1986, remained active until the end of 2001.

It is beyond the scope and resources of this project to conduct a full analysis of all 'alternative' Super 8 groups active in the period 1986-2001 (for example, the Ballarat Super 8 Film Group, Perth Independent Filmmakers), so discussion is largely confined to the Melbourne Super 8 Film Group (MS8FG) as the most prominent of these. For a significant period of time, the MS8FG received annual funding support from the Australian Film Commission in recognition of its contribution to independent film culture. The Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and Ballarat Super 8 groups can be distinguished from the amateur cine-clubs discussed in the next chapter by their focus

on personal, alternative filmmaking - as opposed to group-based conventional filmmaking along the lines of Hollywood drama. Although these groups were influenced by a variety of historical movements in alternative filmmaking, it seems to me that both had strong links to 1960s New American Cinema and the 1960s Sydney Underground scene. The practices of both these movements need to be examined against the wider history of alternative filmmaking for a closer understanding of Australian Super 8 culture between 1986 and 1995.

Historical and theoretical discussions of 'alternative' film often begin by making a distinction between 'representational' and 'abstract' film. Representational films reflect on the experience of cinema through reference to content which we recognise as part of the 'real world' – familiar depictions of people, places and objects. They draw attention to processes of reception – our cognitive expectations in relation to the conventions of film language. Abstract films, on the other hand, attempt to sever any connection with a referent in the real world. They are concerned with the celluloid surface, with 'film as film' – "no longer do we look through the frame to the world outside - we look at it" (Sobchack & Sobchack, 1987, p. 395). Familiar objects may be transformed and 'abstracted' from their real-world connection in a formal exploration of the qualities of motion picture film - colour, shape, light, texture, movement and temporality. Avant-garde film of this nature has been termed 'pure', 'formal' or 'structural' cinema. In a critique of this distinction, Le Grice (2001) notes that representational imagery is common in 'formal' or 'structural' film, and even when 'abstracted' from reality, signification is at work when meaning is generated from the association of one image with another:

Even in extreme non-representational art, the production of the image and its subsequent 'received' meaning is affected by the mechanisms of psychological association. The image, however abstract, is read associatively and signifies, produces and takes on meaning ... in 'formal cinema', it must be understood that association and signification are not processes of meaning confined to the constituent images, representational or abstract, but belong also to the formal manoeuvres themselves. (p. 32)

Histories of 'alternative' film (Le Grice, 1977, 2001; Sitney, 1974, 1978; MacDonald, 1993; Small, 1994) generally agree that avant-garde and experimental film had its origins in European artistic movements of the 1920s. Painters, thespians and sculptors influenced by the radical artistic movements of dada, cubism, German expressionism

and French surrealism embraced filmmaking as a new avenue of expression with which to register their dissatisfaction over existing political conditions. In an interesting departure from other accounts, Sobchack and Sobchack locate the birth of avant-garde film in the work of early European and American animated cartoons:

in its creation of worlds in which logic and cause and effect do not operate as they do in the real world, the cartoon is the first avant-garde film form – and perhaps the only avant-garde film form readily appreciated by mass audiences. (1987, p. 375)

Sitney (1978) describes the first efforts of the European avant-garde as “graphic filmmaking”, in which painters from the traditions of cubism and geometrical abstraction migrated to film in order to extend their work into manipulations of time and space. He singles out four films of the period: *Rhythmus 21* and *Symphonie Diagonale* (Richter & Eggeling, 1921), *Ballet Mechanique* (Leger, 1924) and *Anaemic Cinema* (Duchamp, 1926) as classic examples of the “musical organization of filmic time” (p. xi) in which authorial concerns revolved around temporal explorations of colour, shape, light, texture and movement – pure expressions of the abstract form.

The next major movement, surrealist cinema, grew out of the influences of dadaism. The dada movement’s attack on bourgeois excess “based their creative efforts in acts of destruction meant to emancipate the visual imagination from any dependence on bourgeois tradition” (Sobchack & Sobchack, 1987, p. 376), trading on the juxtaposition of illogical and absurd images in anarchic classics such as *Retour a la Raison* (Ray, 1923) and *Entr’acte* (Clair, 1924). While dadists rejected the dream logic of Freud as just another bourgeois manifestation, the surrealists embraced his controversial theories as part of their political critique of the bourgeoisie in a celebration of “psychic automatism, the free, shocking associations made by an unconscious liberated from the control of reason, morality, and a planned aesthetic” (Sobchack & Sobchack, 1987, p. 377). Key surrealist films such as *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (Dulac, 1928), *Un Chien Andalou* (Dali & Bunuel, 1928) and *L’Age d’Or* (Bunuel, 1930) deployed confronting imagery in scenes where continuity was frequently interrupted by the free associations of dream logic. Later movements in alternative film continued to be influenced by these early avant-garde and experimental films, and incorporated many of their techniques.

Of particular interest to this project is the rise of the American avant-garde in the 1940s. Maya Deren's film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), is often quoted as the seminal film of a new movement in 'personal filmmaking' (Nichols, 2001), a self-reflexive auteurist activity which generated style and content peculiar to the concerns of the individual artist. For Sitney, Deren's most accomplished films explore the "temporal and spatial complexities of representing the self in cinema" (1978, p. xx). Nichols (2001) argues that Deren is remarkable in the history of avant-garde film as the first artist to tour and publicly exhibit her films, thereby creating the model for an alternative system of distribution and exhibition which first manifested itself in the New American Cinema of the 1950s:

Deren demonstrated how such artists could gain common recognition and participate in a shared framework of distribution, exhibition and critical discourse. Along with the inexhaustible efforts of Jonas Mekas, Amos Vogel, and others, Deren formulated the terms and conditions of an independent cinema which remain with us today. (pp. 6-7)

The New American Cinema of the 1950s and 1960s reflected a diversity of approaches to alternative filmmaking. Films were screened at universities, colleges and independent venues to young audiences disaffected with the conservative political climate of the day. While personal filmmaking continued to explore the everyday and the intimate through the autobiographical and diary films of Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas and Shirley Clarke, other filmmakers returned to structural concerns (Andy Warhol, Michael Snow) in a new exploration of the cognitive processes of receiving cinema (Sitney, 1978). This new structuralist attack on audience expectations generated by conventional cinema spilled out into a more overt political critique of both cinema and culture in the extreme form of 'underground' film. The American underground exploited the exemption of their 'marginal' films from a censorship system to incorporate sexually explicit and 'taboo' imagery in a social exploration of themes where Hollywood cinema could not, and would not, go. Films about race, sexuality and identity formed part of the underground agenda. For example, Kenneth Anger investigated machismo and homosexuality in three films of the 1960s: *Scorpio Rising* (1963), *Lucifer Rising* (1966-67) and *Invocation of My Demon Brother* (1969) (Sobchack & Sobchack, 1987, p. 380).

Maya Deren's model of an alternative, independent film culture and the excitement of the youth culture-oriented American underground stimulated a similar movement in

Australia. The most significant documented example of the Australian underground is provided in Peter Mudie's book *Sydney Underground Movies: Ubu Films 1965-1970*. This work charts the activities of Ubu Films, a filmmaking co-operative which Mudie argues dominated the Sydney underground scene in the 1960s and eventually became instrumental in attracting government funding for Australian 'independent' film. The New American Cinema had inspired the formation of filmmaking co-operatives around the world in the 1960s. Ubu Films formed in 1965 with a core membership of experimental artists Albie Thoms, David Perry, Aggy Read, and John Clark. Significant films produced by Ubu include formalist experiments such as *Halftone* (Perry, 1966) and *Man and His World* (Thoms, 1966), meditations on cinematic conventions such as *Bolero* (Thoms, 1967) and *Marinetti* (Thoms, 1969) and the anti-establishment, satirical works *The Tribulations of Mr. Dupont Nomore* (Perry, 1967) and *Boobs A Lot* (Read, 1968). Mudie finds Ubu Films significant for its status as "Australia's first group devoted to making experimental films, and the first organisation to establish an extensive network for the exhibition and distribution of independent films" (1997, p. 6).

Like Maya Deren, Ubu Films provided a model for an alternative, independent film culture – but this time with an Australian focus. Its controversial and trail-blazing activities in the 1960s stemmed from a four-fold philosophy of production, exhibition, distribution and discussion with the underlying principle of "exploring a truly modernist and democratic form of cinema, with all its variations and possibilities" (Mudie, 1997, p. 7). As Mudie points out, Ubu emerged during a transitional period when Australia was without a national cinema, and as such, its activities took place against the backdrop of the "reformation of archaic censorship legislation, the development of a critical field in the press, and the establishment of direct government support for the arts" (1997, p. 7). Ubu Films had a commitment to making and screening all varieties of alternative, independent film through its informal national distribution network, but gained most attention for its production and screening of 'underground' films which constantly challenged censorship boundaries of the time.

The banning, and subsequent court appeals against these bans, attracted media publicity which only served to highlight Ubu's activities and its increasing mythical status as a self-supported organisation 'going it alone' in the promotion and exhibition of Australian independent film. A complete examination of the significance of Ubu Films and early Australian alternative cinema falls outside the scope of this project, but the values embodied in its oppositional discourses and practices are clearly re-articulated

through the Melbourne Super 8 Film Group, which, as will be seen later, possibly suffered the same ultimate fate of incorporation into the mainstream.

Ubu Films' success in contributing to the establishment of an independent national cinema applied pressure to the Australian Government to provide funding support for a three-tiered plan which included a national film and television school, a film development corporation, and an experimental film and television fund. Mudie notes that as the first funding was allocated in 1970, Ubu Films' wide tolerance for cinematic forms placed it at the margins:

Previously at the forefront of creative film activity in Australia, and having played a major role in the development of a vibrant independent film community, Ubu was abandoned and rejected by the formula prescribed by the newly formed government arts funding body. For the ACA [Australian Council for the Arts] it was clear – art would be art, and film would be entertainment and information – no matter what guise restrictive funding was to assume in the future. (1997, p. 17)

Ubu had thrived in a no-funding environment, but quickly disbanded as it was incorporated into a powerful new institutional and discursive structure which took over the power to speak on behalf of Australian cinema – an institutional structure which was to promote mainstream values and effectively silence the voice of alternative film. Nonetheless, alternative filmmaking continued outside the auspices of this structure, and Ubu Films remained a model of an alternative, independent film culture for others to follow.

Super 8 and Avant-Garde Film

Up until the 1970s, the preferred medium of expression for avant-garde, experimental, underground and independent filmmakers had been 16mm film. The evolution of 16mm into a semi-professional medium during the second world war had resulted in the wide availability of sophisticated cameras, projection equipment and laboratory services, a necessary pre-condition for independent production, distribution and exhibition. The formalistic concerns of many alternative filmmakers demanded cameras with a high potential for image manipulation, and laboratories which offered both optical effects and duplication services. In Australia, Ubu Films produced work exclusively on the

16mm gauge and the New American Cinema's most famous filmmaking co-operative, Cinema 16, was named after the gauge! However, Standard 8 had featured in the New American Cinema early as the 1940s. Hoberman, writing in 1981 about what he saw as an impending 'Super 8 invasion' of the American avant-garde, argued that narrow-gauge filmmaking was the more appropriate tool of the avant-gardist:

the narrow gauge format is less akin to 16mm than 16mm is to [professional] 35mm narrow gauge accentuates all that is fragile, fugitive and ephemeral about film in general no matter how disparate their work or contradictory its ambitions, every one of their home-made productions serves to criticize the prodigal values of the larger culture industry narrow gauge is an inherently radical practice (p. 39).

Hoberman sets up a binary opposition between narrow gauge filmmaking and professional, wide-gauge cinema. In delivering a critique of mainstream cinema, Hoberman argues that radical, underground cinema must be everything that the Hollywood machine is not – in subject matter, choice of medium, aesthetics, economics and production processes. He 'essentialises' Super 8 as the antithesis of commercial production, arguing for the aesthetic pleasures and greater flexibility of the Super 8 medium as a panacea for financially-challenged avant-garde creatives of the 1980s. He cites the work of such filmmakers as George and Mike Kuchar, "who spent the last half of the Fifties making grotesque 8mm parodies of Hollywood movies"; the 1960s *Songs* series by Stan Brakhage; and Ken Jacobs' films (between 1964 and 1967) as creating "a small 8mm wedge with the New American Cinema" (1981, p. 40). Among other aesthetic virtues and filmmaking practices to be discussed below, Hoberman praises the mobility of the camera, the graininess of the image and the practice of in-camera editing as catalysts for diaristic and "personalized urban-verite" styles casting the camera as both participant and observer. Significantly, camera mobility, grain and 'urban-verite' style are characteristics of mainstream cinema today.

Brakhage's *Songs* series consisted of more than 20 silent short films made throughout the 1960s. Lyrical explorations of the minutiae of everyday life, Brakhage took "home movie events (births, weddings, trips, portraits of family and friends) as his subject matter" (Hoberman, 1981, p. 40) in a personal re-interpretation of the home-movie aesthetic which exploited the physical qualities of the non-commercial medium while offering the possibility of selling copies of his work through the relative inexpense of duplication on the 8mm gauge (Sitney, 1974). For Hoberman, a decisive moment in

what he sees as the opening-up of Super 8 as an avant-garde medium is Kodak's introduction of synchronous sound recording in 1974. Brakhage's domination of the 8mm medium for almost 10 years promoted a culture of reception which understood 8mm to be a silent medium, asserting the primacy of image. The arrival of affordable sync-sound equipment re-cast the potential of Super 8 as a production medium, and was followed shortly by the arrival of the American punk scene with its 'do-it-yourself' underground sensibility. Hoberman cites the punk-influenced American Super 8 "no-wave" movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s as a catalyst for a new, more populist talkie cinema which "fuse[d] the various traditions of urban verite, confessional psychodrama, and home-movie dailiness into an original style that's marked by its political overtones" (1981, p. 43).

The Australian avant-garde scene also boasted early work on Standard and Super 8. Cantrill (1997) reports activity in Melbourne dating from 1970, including work by Hugh McSpedden, Jim Wilson, Lynsey Martin, James Clayden, Tim Burns, the Clifton Hill Music Group and the prolific Richard and Pat Larter, who produced 27 Super 8 films between 1970 and 1981. Arthur and Corinne Cantrill, once described as "the grand moma and dada of Australian experimental film" (Burns, 1998) – a reference to the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMa) and the famous art movement – have been prolific filmmakers since 1960 and had the distinction of publishing Australia's only journal devoted to avant-garde film, *Cantrills Filmnotes* between 1971 and 2000. Their decision in 1990 to abandon working on 16mm and migrate to filming exclusively on the Super 8 medium was first and foremost an economic decision – "by now laboratory charges were so high for 16mm there could be no pleasure in working with such an expensive medium" (Cantrill, 1997, p. 64), but was also a response to the environmental advantages of Super 8 as a physically smaller medium, and the vibrant independent film culture which had formed around the Melbourne Super 8 Film Group since 1986.

The Melbourne Super 8 Film Group (1986-2001)

As suggested above, the formation of the Melbourne Super 8 Film Group (MS8FG) might be seen as a meeting of the 8mm tradition of the New American Cinema with a desire for what had been lost by the demise of Ubu Films – an independent and oppositional cinema. Like Cinema 16, the MS8FG formed around the specificity of a medium, or more accurately perhaps, around the specificity of a gauge within a

medium. Australian arts writer Edward Colless joins Hoberman (1981) in an affirmation of Super 8's symbiotic relationship with the avant-garde:

Super 8 secures its cultural place by rhetorically outbidding the prodigality exhibited by the 16mm political and aesthetic avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s, hardly exhorting departure so much as simply announcing its arrival: the advent of Super 8 is the occasion of an avant-garde-arrivé. (Colless, 1996, p. 33)

Formed by Melbourne filmmaker and critic Bill Mousoulis out of an expressed desire to unite Super 8 filmmakers and provide a common screening venue (Rudd, 2001, p. 6a), and reminiscent of the early avant-garde movement, the MS8FG brought together a diverse cross-section of the arts community - painters, photographers, dancers, musicians, and filmmakers. Early members included Maj Green, Ewan Cameron, Chris Windmill, Marie Craven and Nick Ostrovkis (Cantrill, 1997, p. 63). This diversity would later encourage the notion of an 'expanded cinema', incorporating Super 8 into innovative hybrid forms of film, music, video and art. The group's stated aims of fostering the production, distribution, exhibition and discussion of Super 8 films in the promotion of Super 8 filmmaking as a cultural activity (Melbourne Super 8 Film Group, n.d.) had strong resonance with Ubu Films' aims in the 1960s.

Also reminiscent of Ubu Films' aims was the vision of a culture which supported all genres of production. The difference was that production had to be media-specific - made and projected on Super 8. As will be discussed in the next chapter, this position later came under attack within the group as various factors converged to ultimately spell the end of the cultural phenomenon that was the MS8FG. A 1992 article by member Steven Ball attributed the success of the group to the contradictory potential of Super 8 to both absorb and perpetuate notions of difference:

Each of those individuals is a member of the group for reasons of their own with differing levels of filmmaking experience, different ambitions, working in different genres. It would appear that the arena of Super 8 filmmaking has opened up and can accommodate those differences. Difference is an important aspect of the group ... Super 8 operates outside of the commercial and industrial filmmaking structure ... and yet is not restricted by a notion of experimentalism or the traditional avant-garde. (p. 7)

Three elements underpinned the success and activity of the MS8FG - its monthly screenings at the Erwin Rado Theatre in Fitzroy, its running of the annual Melbourne Super 8 Film Festival, and the lively film discourse generated in its monthly magazine/newsletter, *Super Eight*. Again, perhaps taking the lead from Ubu Films' own controversial counter-culture organ, *UbuNews*, Ball notes that early issues of *Super Eight* became the vehicle for impassioned rhetorical debate about the role of the group:

Divergences of opinion and expressions of visionary aspirations ... during these years (roughly 1986-90) make fascinating and dizzyingly confusing reading ... Many of the arguments around at this time veer between serious (albeit sometimes rather pretentious and naïve discussions) about the aspirations of the group and 'the scene', bitter personal attacks and adolescent squabbling. Between all this it seems there was time left to make films. (1992, p. 6)

If *Super Eight* encouraged "material covering Super 8 filmmaking culture, practice and related areas including technical information, details of screenings, critical debate, filmnotes, poetry, artwork and so forth" (Melbourne Super 8 Film Group, n.d.), then its highlight had to be critical reviews of monthly screenings at the Erwin Rado, in which all films risked "being praised to the heights or pulled to pieces" (Ball, 1992, p. 7). These critical reviews, many of them written (since 1996) by members Steven Ball, Tony Woods, Dirk de Bruyn, Heinz Boeck and Rad Rudd, provide an entertaining insight into the 1000 or more films produced during the 15-year lifespan of the group. Member Jim Bridges commented on the work of fellow MS8FG filmmaker Tony Woods in a 1998 review:

I like Tony's films mostly and I admire his tenacity as he captures the stuff of life ... with his birds on wires, cats in lanes, insects on glass or bees rooting around in gigantic flowers. But like the Japanese, I suspect that less is more ... how many sketches does an audience want to flick through to get to the Artist's vision of the world? (p. 3)

Another review mused on the aesthetics of Super 8 production:

I have often wondered why it is that black and white [Super 8] films seem to have a more direct expressive power compared to films shot in colour. It seems that when we reduce the visual elements that can lend their

meaningful nuances to our perception – when there's less to decipher, less to confuse or distract our reading of the film, the intensity of the effect is then more focused. (Boeck, 1997, p. 7)

The aesthetics of Super 8 production are central to an argument which 'essentialises' the medium and suggests that the cultural meanings and practices of Super 8 production can be fixed as unique to, and arising directly from, the specific aesthetic properties of a particular medium – an argument which this thesis chooses to reject.

'Essential' Super 8

An interesting aspect of investigating the Super 8 phenomenon is its frequent construction as a 'medium', rather than as a film 'gauge'. If one considers film as a base medium which is then produced in different widths and lengths, does 'versioning' of that medium actually constitute the creation of new media? The answer to that question is rather complex.

As discussed in Chapter 2, it is the industrial construction of a political economy of amateur and professional filmmaking which has set up a hierarchy of film gauges – 8mm, 16mm and 35mm. The professional end of the market is characterised by a world of possibility, but economic inaccessibility to the amateur. The amateur end of the market is characterised by accessibility, but a restriction of production possibilities. As Hoberman (1981) and Winston (1996) have suggested, amateur practice can only have meaning in relation to professional practice if it exists as a binary opposite – in both the physical (aesthetic) properties of the visual canvas, and the cultural practices of producing, distributing and receiving works on that 'canvas'. At that level, Super 8 is fundamentally in opposition to commercial 35mm cinema. However, this opposition only becomes a true radical political practice if a marginal group deploys the 'canvas' in a discursive practice which reflexively draws attention to physical properties of the (counter) medium and delivers content and styles of production which comment on the (limiting) practices of mainstream cinema as restricted by the vested interests of transnational capitalism.

While home movies may have offered a limited resistance to dominant institutional structures, their greater legacy has been to map out an historically-based 'aesthetic of intimacy'. This 'intimacy' is marked by familiar family members addressing the camera,

surroundings of mundane ordinariness, mobile, shaky camerawork and the vibrant, grainy colour of Super 8 film stock. Since most home movies (and home videos) are inevitably records of family events and children growing up, they invoke a 'nostalgia effect' which is associated with memories of the past. In a wider sense, Super 8 has an inextricable association with the politics, aesthetics and ideologies of a time gone by. Crimmings (2003) has commented on Super 8's relationship to 'memory', a relationship which springs from the longer history of colour home movies (available on 16mm Kodachrome since 1932 and on Standard 8 since 1936) and its aesthetic differences from its home video successor:

For many people, Super 8 has become synonymous with what they understand to be memory. Saturated colours seep into one another, the film's graininess quivering and accumulating like dust on every frame. Movement shifts and changes speed, and details of light, colour and texture, like memory itself, are fleeting and ill-defined. It is these distinct qualities that imbue Super 8 with its timeless charm, and it is this charm that makes Super 8 the perfect apparatus for signifying memory. (p. 37)

This thesis contends that claims for the oppositional nature and essential character of Super 8 flow from the (historical) construction of ideology and practice around the physical and economic properties of the medium. The stability of these physical and economic properties for the medium's first 30 years have assisted 'essentialisation' of Super 8 – the fixing of preferred meanings around the production and consumption of Super 8. The development of discourses around the essential (aesthetic) character of Super 8 provides, in film philosopher Noel Carroll's terms, a media-specificity argument – the notion that particular media "have a range of aesthetic effects peculiar to them whose exploitation marks the proper avenue of artistic exploitation within the medium in question" (1996, p. 3). The effect of a media-specificity argument is to mark out unique aesthetic territory which promotes a particular politics and practice for that medium – allegedly "because there is something that, in virtue of their respective media, they can do that other arts cannot, or that these forms can do better than other arts" (Carroll, 1996, p. 7). Carroll finds media-specificity arguments to be spurious, self-serving strategies aimed at protecting vested interests – "most often, perhaps in all cases, medium specificity recommendations turn out not to be defences of a given medium per se, but briefs in favour of certain styles, genres and artistic movements" (1996, p. 19).

Carroll's work is about film, photography and video at the macro-level, but is still relevant to this project's investigation of a specificity argument about a 'gauge within a medium'. Interestingly, 'oppositional' Super 8 has even gone one step further – discursively prescribing the 'essential character' and politics of each of the three key reversal stocks available on the Super 8 medium!

'Physical' Super 8

Hollywood cinema, using each new generation of negative film stocks and sophisticated laboratory processes, has been able to continually shift the 'look' of feature films – altering definition, colour, contrast and grain to fit stylistic imperatives. Super 8, conversely, has (until the advent of the 'indie' phase) remained aesthetically 'marooned' in the era of 'popular' 8 – the 1960s and 1970s. The four remaining Kodak stocks offered after 1986 were all products of the 1960s and 1970s. These consisted of two black and white stocks (of which only one was freely available in Australia) and two colour stocks – all of which were 'reversal' films. 'Reversal' (positive) films, unlike 35mm negative films, are not open to laboratory manipulation during processing, such as correction of exposure or the addition of optical effects. Unless the film is home-processed with non-standard chemicals, what you shoot is what you get – within the aesthetic boundaries of the properties of that particular stock. All four stocks look 'dated', contributing to the aforementioned 'nostalgia effect' of Super 8. Although the 'nostalgia effect' is perhaps most prevalent in the ideological practices of production and reception on Kodachrome colour film, 'oppositional' Super 8 culture has constructed discourses and practices around each type of reversal stock (Kodachrome, Ektachrome and Tri-X) which demand interrogation for a better understanding of claims for an essential character of the medium.

Kodachrome Cults

As noted in Chapter 2, Kodachrome amateur motion picture film first became available on the 16mm gauge in 1932. There have been some minor improvements in emulsion since then, but its look has changed very little since that time, and was for more than 40 years the standard choice for colour home movies. Many members of the MS8FG, like Arthur and Corinne Cantrill, have chosen to work exclusively on Kodachrome. The Cantrills' film, *Projected Light*, is an ode to the "rich, saturated quality of original

Kodachrome" (Cantrill, 1997, p.63)! The high contrast and colour saturation of this relatively fine-grained emulsion delivers a sharp image which, if anything, 'overstates' the reality of a filmed situation. Kodachrome's highly saturated colours, when coupled with the capture of the home movie's regulation 'happy' family moments, leans toward an idealised and "hyper-real" interpretation of the family experience – the experience of the simulation exceeds the more mundane reality of family life (Baudrillard, 1981).

Kodachrome continues to be the only Super 8 filmstock which is sold with processing as part of the purchase price. It remains the most cost-effective stock to shoot on, but its inexpense is matched by a further inconvenience. When Kodak's Australian laboratory ceased processing Kodachrome motion picture film in 1991 (Richardson, 1991), Super 8 processing was re-directed to Palo Alto, California. Later, following Kodak's global rationalisation of Super 8 services, Australia joined the rest of the world in having all non-U.S. Kodachrome processing channelled through a central laboratory in Switzerland. Even today, this has resulted in Kodachrome devotees waiting for a period of 3-6 weeks before their film returns and can be viewed! This reflects the extreme end of the ideology of the 'self-control' of the Super 8 filmmaker. Super 8 users reject the instantaneous gratification of video underpinning contemporary society's "I-want-it-now syndrome" and value the opportunity to anticipate and reflect on their work before the moment of revelation (Tierney, 1990). For devotees of oppositional Super 8 practice, this is one element separating the 'reflective' artist from the 'spontaneous' home video operator. Ball develops this theme further in finding that the practice of alternative filmmaking on Super 8 suggests a notion of exclusivity – the possession of superior craft skills:

The use of super 8 mediates against the libertarian notion of the freely expressive artist, the myth of the 'anyone can do it' mentality, and the 'shoot your way to freedom' of the endlessly unspooling camcorder. Super 8 is as limiting as it is liberating. It is relatively cheap and accessible but it also demands an awareness of its limitations (1997, p. 5).

Zimmermann (1995), in a rare moment of praise for the Super 8 medium, champions these limitations in a critique of home video's discursive pre-occupation with automation, technical ease, and sophisticated technology at the right price:

The technical specifications and the assessments on the ease of lightweight-camera shooting disperse the aesthetic, the social, the political.

This equipment returns its user to a natural, primitive state of video pleasure. The glaring absence of aesthetic directives and the enforcement of naturalism and non-intervention suggest that self-consciousness, formalism and interrogation of the relationship between the maker and the subject are not only unnecessary but are vestiges of an antiquated technology and a former era like that of the Super 8. (p. 151)

For Super 8 filmmakers whose aesthetic philosophy embraced colour yet rejected the 'hyper-real' aesthetic of Kodachrome, the only other choice has been 'Ektachrome' film, which embodies different values and practices.

Ektachrome and 'Low-Res' Culture

Ektachrome Super 8 films became available in the 1970s and were designed to accompany Kodak's new XL (existing light) camera range which accommodated indoor filming in low light. Ektachrome, in contrast to Kodachrome's 'warmth' (a propensity to highlight oranges and reds), leaned toward a bluish hue which tended to render a 'colder' image. Descended as it was from 16mm reversal stocks which had commercial applications in television news, documentary and educational productions, Ektachrome brought to Super 8 connotations of documentary realism which have informed views that "8mm produces relatively low-definition, unglamorous images, which are suited more to documenting than to dressing up reality" (Gunter, 1976, p.20).

Grain and resolution are aesthetic qualities which have been mobilised in an oppositional politics of expression. Running counter to the high-resolution, high production values of drama-orientated mainstream commercial cinema and television, grain has been associated with amateur production and documentary truth. Mainstream television has confirmed this with its inclusion of grainy, low resolution video footage from home camcorders and surveillance cameras in reality TV shows such as *Funniest Home Videos* and *World's Wildest Police Chases* – "the more grainy it is, the more it can claim truthful evidential status" (Dovey, 1995, p. 28). In an affirmation of Zimmermann's observation above about the aesthetic disempowerment of the amateur, emerging digital video technology is working to elide this distinction as domestic camcorders produce even higher levels of picture quality at an ever lower cost. As developments in chemistry and electronics have reduced grain and improved

resolution in professional production media, Super 8 has become the last bastion of 'low-res' expression in a 'high-res' world.

Grain and resolution can share both a complementary and an oppositional relationship. Grain can be distinct, yet part of a sharp image (as with Kodachrome and the black and white 'Tri X') or indistinct and contribute to a softer, disembodied image (as with video 8 and the current generation of Ektachrome Super 8). The 'softness' of Ektachrome is often now used to connote intimate dream states and surreal, other-worldly circumstances.

Intimacy is often associated with Super 8. Its home movie origins entailing "a close personal complicity between those filmed and the filmmaker – a kind of trust that this act of being captured on film is 'between us' (Boeck, 1997a, p. 6) has been coupled with the 'street cinema' ethos advocated by Gunter (1976):

8 mm is ubiquitous, and is often present when noteworthy events occur. 8 mm can wait around where such events are likely to occur. 8 mm equipment is non-threatening to people, and encourages spontaneous, unaffected and intimate expression. (p. 20)

Super 8 as personal cinema and an inherently oppositional medium (Hoberman, 1981; Ball, 1997; Hudson, 1998) has been appropriated in the expression of identity politics. Chin (1992) has discussed the role of Super 8 aesthetics in the representation of gay and lesbian culture – "the spareness, the unadorned directness, the simplicity of means are the way of creating statements speaking right at the heart of current gay life" (p. 81) and Chicano-American filmmaker Willie Varela has appropriated Super 8 in a cross-cultural commentary "constructing a separate frame of aesthetics that would speak to the unique experience of being situated between two cultures" (1994, p. 97).

If Super 8 has been about politics as much as aesthetics, it might be argued that colour has packed the real punch in the former department. Ideology and practice around black and white production has tended to be more interested in aesthetics than politics.

Tri X – Metaphor, Metaphor

Of Kodak's black and white stocks, 'Tri X' and 'Plus X', the former has proved most popular with the post home-movie set, and the latter has been difficult to obtain as Kodak Australia have declined to include it in their product catalogue. Originally a high-speed film designed for the politically-benign purpose of filming night sports, Tri X has become an aesthetic favourite with alternative, and later, 'indie' filmmakers. Its high contrast, sharpness and extreme highlighting of grain have provided a useful platform for more aesthetic, and less political, styles of filmmaking. As a black and white stock, it immediately references 'art' and nostalgia. Tri X lends itself to homage (and occasionally parody) of past film movements such as film noir and cinema-verite. It also invokes the early black and white silent cinema with its emphasis on visual elements and the jerky movements of its actors. Tri X is primal and visceral cinema. When shown on a projector using a bright, white xenon globe, the grain actually takes on a life of its own, pulsing and shimmering as the celluloid passes through the projection gate. This 'cinema experience' has been part of the cult of Super 8 reception which has had strong expression both in the MS8FG and the Pandora's Box Super 8 Film Festival.

The capacity to duplicate Super 8 films to Super 8 in Australia was lost in the early 1990s as the handful of independent laboratories offering this service discontinued it. Super 8 duplication had never been particularly successful in aesthetic terms as Kodak had never pursued a process which offered accurate and crisp reproduction of originals (Lightman, 1969). Projecting 'fragile' camera originals edited with splicing tapes became part of the ethos of the MS8FG in a stance which both critiqued the status of the Hollywood film as a commodity to be endlessly duplicated and sold, and the nature of video as an exhibition medium – "videoed film is not film" (Cantrill, 1997, p. 61). Monthly gatherings at the Erwin Rado implied active participation in film culture – bringing films, projecting them, and watching and discussing them. Projecting films took on aspects of an expanded cinema when multiple projectors, film loops and other media became part of the audience experience. MS8FG screenings militated against the isolationist, commodified, passive, home-based viewing experience of the rented mainstream video through creating a community-based cinema of participation. It was this principle of a "cinema of participation" which underpinned the emergence of the Pandora's Box Super 8 Film Festival in 1992.

Pandora's Box Super 8 Film Festival 1992 – ?

Pandora's Box was conceived as an annual crossover event for budding filmmakers and musicians, and is now one of the longest-running independent film culture events in Australia. I became involved with this event in 1998 and directed the 1999 and 2000 festivals. Aspiring filmmakers (often with no experience) receive a crash-course in low-tech Super 8 filmmaking before shooting a single cartridge of film (3.5 minutes) to the event theme. Taking either a narrative or experimental approach, filmmakers are instructed to produce a silent, edited-in-camera film with 'interesting' visuals.

The processed films are then passed directly to local musicians who compose and record a soundtrack/score based on their own interpretation(s) of the film without reference to the filmmaker. The filmmakers then watch their films and hear the soundtracks for the first time before a large, but supportive cinema audience who are ready to vicariously share the filmmaker's emotional, roller-coaster ride as he/she experiences the highs and lows of first-time filmmaking.

Pandora's Box is culturally interesting for a number of reasons. In the 'oppositional' style of Super 8, it challenges the dominant models of mainstream Hollywood cinema and independent film festivals. It interrupts the Hollywood message by commandeering a commercial cinema and presenting marginal films (local films on local topics) by 'nobody' filmmakers. It attacks the mystique of big-screen professional cinema by eliminating editing and revealing authorial mistakes – a process which the audience usually enjoys! The filmmaker, too, becomes accessible in an atmosphere of 'community' rather than being perceived as a removed, aloof, god-like creative entity. In a critique of the competitive nature of 'independent' film festivals, Pandora's Box eschews a pre-selection process and guarantees all entrants a screening regardless of the 'quality' of their work. Participation is the key ethos of the festival.

Pandora's Box also anticipates and foreshadows the era of 'indie' Super 8 in walking the line between the more traditional, 'alternative' approach of the MS8FG and a newer, hybridised approach with a commercial inflection. Its approach of screening all entries validates the 'anyone can make it' mythology of 'indie' filmmaking, especially by screening in a commercial venue. However, its concentration on a visual approach to filmmaking and openness to genre and ideas locates the practices of participating filmmakers in alternative, rather than mainstream filmmaking. Pandora's Box films are

often personal films in the style of MS8FG filmmakers, and are screened in the medium of origination.

The difference lies in the influence of music on this event. Billed as "Super 8 meets digital audio in a 5000 watt Flickfest" (promotional poster, 2000), there is a two-way dialogue in this event between music and the image. In one sense, Pandora's Box is the 'music clip in reverse' – composers make (their own) sense of the images and then record accordingly. However, when music overpowers the image, the experience of these films can be similar to watching a music video. Herein lies anticipation of things to come – 'indie' filmmakers have embraced the Super 8 medium for production of commercial music clips. As will be discussed in the next chapter, part of the secret to the longevity of the Pandora's Box Super 8 Film Festival has been its ability to stand outside some of the issues which contributed to the ultimate demise of the MS8FG in 2001.

New Kids on the Block: Rise of 'Indie' Culture

As the mid-1990s arrived, the MS8FG began to face the challenges of a changing economic, cultural and technological climate. The Australian Film Commission, which had financially supported the group for many years, began to give indications of a more restrictive funding climate. MS8FG founder Bill Mousoulis noted the 'disturbing' emergence of a new youth film culture:

In the last 2 or 3 years ... there has been a veritable explosion of what might be termed 'youth film culture'. Film festivals like Tropfest, the Provincial Film Festival, Flickerfest etc, have sprung up, TV shows like *Race Around the World* and the various *Loud* segments have been produced, screenings at cafes ... are being conducted, a magazine like *Independent Filmmakers Journal* is being published, and more short-term filmmaking courses are now being offered ... It seems that every single person in Australia aged between 16 and 30 is currently being encouraged to come out of their closet/bedroom and make a film, video, CD-ROM, whatever. (1998, p. 7)

For Mousoulis, the 'disturbing' element of the new youth 'indie' film culture was its shameless commitment to 'surface' – "if the films aren't crappy comedies or ironic piss-

takes ... they are incredibly inept attempts at social commentary or political polemic, or just piss-poor arthouse imitations" (1998, p. 8). Another fly in the ointment was the emergence of mini-digital video, the first small-camera video format to achieve Super 8 camera size with broadcast quality image resolution and synchronous digital sound recording. A rhetoric, largely circulated by *Independent Filmmakers Magazine*, was beginning to build around the mini-DV camera as the revolutionary tool of the new-age independent filmmaker (McDonald, 1999; 2000). However, the very proliferation of this utopian digital technology in the next decade would prove to be a boon to a reconstituted Super 8 – a Super 8 which now aspired to the lofty label of 'Pro' – 8.

As 1996 approached, the MS8FG headed into its tenth anniversary with an enviable history of alternative production in an era which had worked to limit the opportunities for production and exhibition for the marginal and independent filmmaker. Member Steven Ball, reflecting on the nature of the group in 1992, offered the following commentary on the metaphor of the group as an organic body with all parts working towards the good of the whole:

The flaw in this metaphor is that it suggests that the group is a self-perpetuating and enclosed organism ... like any organism, it is also subject to external influences: the ageing process, the changes that occur through time, the introduction of new external stimuli. Perhaps another metaphor could be that of an eco-system and as eco-systems change with the development of new species, mutant, hybrid, introduced, so does the group change as new members join, existing members step into or out of the background, or leave, drifting into greatness, obscurity or simply away. (Ball, 1992, p. 7)

These words would prove to be prophetic as youth culture permeated Super 8 and created the mainstream spectacle of Perth's Metropolis Super 8 Film Festival, the ultimate expression of 'indie' Super 8.

CHAPTER 5

"Indie" Super 8 – Professionalisation Looms (1996-2001)

A few years ago I was a Super 8 filmmaker who had no contact with any other filmmakers. I hadn't gone to film school, I'm not in film groups. I had a basic Super 8 camera and a cassette player and I wanted people like that to be able to enter on a level playing field. There is this sense in the film industry in Australia among young people that it is incredibly accessible ... that there's nothing to stop you making it as well. (Ross Hampton - Director, Metropolis Super 8 Film Festival)

The Metropolis Super 8 Film Festival (1996-1998), with its lucrative \$3000 cash first prize for best film, arrived at precisely the right moment to capitalise on the rise of the Australian "you too can make it" syndrome (Mousoulis, 1998), a mythology which had largely been built around the success of Emma Kate Croghan's low budget feature, *Love and Other Catastrophes* (Tanskaya, 1995; Barda, 1997; Lopez, 1997). Mousoulis dismisses the aspirations of these "adolescent (even at 30) wannabes" as juvenile responses to a seductive, but false rhetoric which promised superficial media stardom rather than the rich rewards of committed personal artistry – "you can become a John Saffron, instantaneous media star. Or you can be off to glorious Hollywood land, like Robert Luketic and Emma-Kate Croghan" (1998, p. 8). Although this rhetoric coincided with the energising excitement of American off-shore investment in the Australian film industry (Fox Studios etc), the reality was that opportunities for young people to launch a directorial career in filmmaking were highly limited. However, this rhetoric 'spoke' to a media-obsessed youth culture just waiting for the opportunity to 'try their luck' and celebrate the new 'cult of the celebrity' (Susman, 1979).

The arrival of the Metropolis was located in the midst of industrial, aesthetic and social influences which were to shape Super 8 cultural practice as it motored (rather unexpectedly) into the 21st century. These factors altered the political economy of Super 8 filmmaking, affecting suppliers of Super 8 services and commodities as well as producers and consumers of Super 8 texts. Two very significant (and related) shifts in the cultural practice of Super 8 filmmaking occurred as a result of forces at play during the 'indie' phase. The first was an appropriation of Super 8 in the production of

mainstream cinema and television. The second was Kodak's reclamation of discursive control over the Super 8 medium, which produced a dominant discourse incorporating Super 8 as part of the apparatus of commercial production. By 2001, 'indie' Super 8 had receded as the dominant cultural practice of the medium. The Melbourne Super 8 Film Group was no more and both 'alternative' and 'indie' Super 8 took a back seat as Super 8 evolved into a new 'professional' phase.

As will be seen below, Kodak began the 'indie' phase with a redundancy strategy for Super 8 informed by an economic rationalist philosophy. An attempted homogenisation of Super 8 activity by the monopoly supplier was immediately challenged by guerilla tactics on the part of 'alternative' and 'indie' filmmakers – a challenge which stimulated Kodak to reconsider the cultural status of Super 8 filmmaking and its own strategies in relation to marketing and exploitation of Super 8 commodities. This chapter charts the influences which contributed to a shift in the meanings and practices of Super 8 culture during the 'indie' phase – including disenchantment with the promised democratic potential of video, the new visual culture's boredom with 'everyday' video aesthetics, the rise of indie film culture and its fascination with 'retro' elements, and colonisation of the Super 8 medium by a significant new industry player, American-based Super 8 Sound Incorporated. Super 8 Sound's emergence as a producer of new generation Super 8 filmstocks ('Pro-8') both caught Kodak by surprise and redefined the cultural and industrial role of Super 8 filmmaking. Case studies of Super 8 Sound Inc, Perth's Metropolis Super 8 Film Festival (1996-1998) and the final years of the Melbourne Super 8 Film Group (1986-2001) are presented as examples illustrating the unfolding cultural history of Super 8 filmmaking during this period.

Video Fails to Deliver

The film vs. video debate has been around since video first appeared as a production medium. Much has been written about the respective economic and aesthetic advantages of both media. Continuing suggestions that video is forever "living in the shadow of film" (Gilette, 1973; Kerrison, 1999; Rudd, 1999; Grammenos, 2000) fail to discern that the fundamental difference between film and video (until very recent times) has been an industrial difference. Film has continued to be the medium of origination and exhibition in the commercial cinema, while the 'immediacy' of video (eliminating the need for laboratory involvement) has lent itself to television applications with a need for live-to-air transmission and instant reportage.

The much-talked-about 'superior' image quality of film – its greater contrast ratio, its highly saturated colours, and its ability to convey depth through a softer rendering of spatially-differentiated 'layers' of mise-en-scène is contrasted with the flatness and the hard edges of the video image, an aesthetic which is frequently associated with the documentary realism of news broadcasts. Video entered the 'indie' phase of Super 8 as a medium beginning to make the transition from analogue to digital technology. Mini digital video was in its infancy, as was the premise of the low budget digital feature later to be widely embraced by indie hopefuls - the recent low-budget West Australian feature *Teesh and Trude* is an example of this strategy. Major developments in digital post-production were still in progress. Analogue video's relationship to the everyday, distracted experience of consuming the incessant flow of television on the small screen (Fiske, 1987) distanced it (in the mind of up-and-coming 'indie' directors) from the intense, dedicated and reverential cinematic occasion of big-screen auteur worship. Analogue video was perceived by producer and consumer alike as anti-cinema and without the artistic virtues of the filmic process. The editorial for the inaugural issue of Australia's first narrow-gauge amateur filmmaking magazine, *The 8mm Film Guide*, attacked the 'banality' of the video experience in the best 'indie' spirit:

Super 8 is coming back with more popularity - especially with the younger generation, in schools, TAFE's and universities. Why? Because young people are brain-strained and brainwashed with looking at computers and TV. (Bourke, 1995, p. 3)

Editor Rodney Bourke goes on to note the economic advantages of working on Super 8 – "a camera, projector, editor, splicer and screen in 8mm can cost around \$200, the same in video try \$10,000" (1995, p. 3). Low-budget 'indie' directors in 1996 were faced with a frustrating array of production technology. The proliferation of domestic video formats (VHS, VHS-C, Video 8) and semi-professional formats (U-Matic, S-VHS, SVHS-C, Hi-8) offered a confusing range of production options which all suffered from the same disadvantages: degradation of image in duplication and the need for costly analogue editing decks and video controllers. 16mm film and professional video formats like Betacam SP were a further step beyond the scant resources of self-funded indie hopefuls. The revolutionising force of mini digital video cameras and desktop editing systems (to be discussed in the final chapter) had just arrived on the market, but cost remained prohibitive.

Kodak had heralded the increasing redundancy rate of amateur production formats and equipment when it displaced Standard 8 with Super 8, but in Super 8 it had created a format which, by 1996, had remained stable for over 30 years. While effectively a monopoly format (with the exception of 'Single' 8 and 9.5mm – which fall outside the scope of this enquiry), Kodak cartridges dropped into all Super 8 cameras, regardless of age and manufacturer. This offered a stability which the ever-changing procession of domestic and semi-professional video technologies has never been able to offer. Slater (1991) has noted increasing consumer resistance to the "constant renewal of the market through technical innovation" and suggests that "the 'maturity' of the market in means of representation seems evident in the very lack of shock and excitement provided by the new" (p. 59). A similar perception prompted MS8FG filmmaker Diane Duncombe to urge fellow members to extol the virtues of the Super 8 medium:

Super 8 does have the ability to do many things that new technologies find difficult. There will always be the responsibility to broaden public perception that new technologies are not necessarily always better, currently available, or even affordable. Many new technology claims are still in the realm of pure fantasy. This group can play an active role in changing face of technology debate by clearly stating over and over again the case for Super 8 filmmaking. (1996, p. 2)

Super 8 filmmaking once again took on the connotations of oppositional practice as 'celluloid fever' gripped youth film culture in the mid 1990s - the practical work accompanying this thesis, *Celluloid Fever*, is an attempt to document this moment. Super 8 offered a direct challenge to the banal aesthetics, false democracy, over-technologisation and televisual sell-out of the video 'saviour', while being firmly positioned as part of film and cinema culture. Ross Hampton, director of the Perth and Melbourne Metropolis Super 8 film festivals, read this cultural situation 'like a book' and, with his festivals, created an unique moment in 'indie' film culture.

Retro-Fever and the Metropolis Super 8 Film Festival

Ross Hampton's vision for the Metropolis was to produce a west-coast response to the hype of the east coast's nationally and internationally feted Tropfest film festival, an ongoing 'mecca' for Aussie indie wannabes. Tropfest is the kind of event which provides wide public exposure (it's even on television) and draws the interest of

industry talent scouts. Hampton's low-budget philosophy espoused a far more democratic version of the 'anyone can make it' myth by limiting the parameters of production so that 'individual merit' could come to the fore more easily:

We made sure that people who had never been in contact with the film industry didn't feel intimidated to have a go. Many of the entries are from schoolteachers or students or professional people who are interested in film but felt that it wasn't something that was readily available to people like them (in Sweeting, 1996, p. 4)

The budget ceiling of \$300 which applied to the 1996 and 1997 events was designed to provide a 'level playing field', as was the low-tech accessibility of the very-affordable equipment. In an astute observation about the cultural appeal of Super 8 technology, Ross Hampton noted that "it's cheap, it's accessible and it's appealingly retro" (in Anderson, 1998, p. 9). The 'x' factor in the Metropolis was the opportunity to indulge in a bit of (still) very fashionable retro-fever. As I have pointed out to students in my Super 8 filmmaking courses, Super 8 cameras are more than just pieces of production equipment, they are also fashion statements of the 1960s and 1970s. The multiplicity of camera manufacturers with their own often bizarre takes on design and styling which mimicked everything from aquatic fish (Agfa Family) to NASA spacecraft (Yashica Electro 8, Kodak XL350), make Super 8 cameras stand out from the anonymity of the home video camera. To handle one is to touch the cultural history and ideological preoccupations of the times which produced it. As noted in the previous chapter, the filmstocks themselves are imbued with connotations of nostalgia. One suspects that younger participants in the Metropolis festivals were reaching out and exploring the youthful modernist experiences of their own parents, who perhaps enjoyed their prime in a period which offered less confusion and despair than their own postmodern sense of reality. This would certainly explain the number of fond parodies of the 1970s produced over the three-year period of the festival!

However much the Metropolis claimed to be a democratic parody of the over-earnestness of the spectacle of Hollywood's Academy Awards with its celebration of 'nobody' directors and 'mini' spectacles, it remains a prime example of 'indie' ideology. In attracting "comparative veterans and those who have never pointed a camera in fury before" (Anderson, 1998, p. 9), all participants worked towards the opportunity for public exposure before a panel of industry judges. At stake was the possibility of being 'discovered' by the industry. The mainstream-orientated narratives of these films and

their exhibition in the accessible and popular venue of a nightclub filled with 3000 people signalled a re-working and re-contextualisation of Super 8. In this moment it veered away from the marginal discourses and closeted confines of underground, avant-garde and experimental film and re-entered popular consciousness as a 'poor man's substitute' for professional 35mm motion picture film addressing popular cinematic tastes.

Indie Film Culture and Film Societies

This sentiment was initially endorsed by the new *Independent Filmmakers (if)* magazine, self-appointed spokesperson for the emerging 'indie' culture of the post-X generation. *if magazine* embraced Super 8 as an expression of indie culture – “we at *if* still love the look and feel of the original independent format, the relatively cheap and ever-funky Super 8” (Castaldi, 1998, p. 54). A regular column became devoted to the medium with the publication of the seventh issue.

The rise of indie film culture did not, of course, mark the first appropriation of Super 8 for the purposes of popular, mainstream entertainment. Film clubs and film societies, a particularly strong movement in the UK, offered opportunities for amateur filmmakers to participate in communities which produced mainly conventional dramatic narratives for in-house screenings and entry in film festivals. The UK club/society culture revolved as much around 'true', amateur hobbyists vicariously living the Hollywood dream as upwardly mobile youngsters seeking entry into the industry. For both indie and club/society cultures, Super 8 represented more of a means to an end rather than a focus in itself. Film clubs and film societies were quick to embrace video technology alongside production on Super 8, and, as will be seen later, mini digital video has become the preferred medium for the low-budget indie hopeful.

Club/society culture is alive and well in Australia. A 1996 survey of clubs registered with the Federation of Australian Movie Makers listed 36 organisations located in 6 states (Bourke, 1996, p. 14). However, the activities of these clubs are far more diverse than just independent production. These organisations include members with interests in collecting film and film equipment, historical film screenings and simple home video production. This represents a very different focus than the career aspirations of a youthful indie film culture.

Kodak 'Communique' - Spanner in the Works!

'Indie' Super 8 continued to gather global momentum through an expanded base of production and exhibition. New Australian festivals emerged on a regular basis including Enigma 8, 8x8, Celestial 8, Le Rip Off Trois Super 8 Fest, Edge of the World and Shoot the Fringe. In the midst of all this, an oblivious Eastman Kodak was busy reviewing its position in relation to the medium. In 1990, Eastman Kodak had conducted a survey of Super 8 usage, which had noted the significant presence of what they termed as "advanced users" working outside the home movie genre. The survey resulted in a continuing commitment to the medium (Brooklyn & Treadway, 1991). Another more cynical interpretation of Kodak's survey might be that it provided a catalyst for the deletion of Standard 8 stocks in the following year!

No such survey preceded Kodak's February 1997 press release entitled *Super 8 Communique*. Shocked Super 8 filmmakers found that (among other product deletions) Kodachrome sound film together with all Ektachrome silent and sound stocks had been discontinued for 'environmental' reasons:

We will be discontinuing certain Super 8 film products in the future while continuing to offer others we hasten to assure all our loyal Super 8 customers, worldwide, that we will continue to offer Super 8 Kodachrome Silent and Super 8 Plus X and Tri X films to the marketplace just as long as there is a reasonable market demand. Of course, we must also assume that there will not be further governmental regulations that will adversely affect our ability to continue to manufacture these products.

Kodak's announcement led to an international crisis in Super 8 culture which mobilised anti-Kodak sentiment. French Super 8 group ART' Themis held a street protest outside the Pathé factory (a Kodak subsidiary) which produced Kodak's Super 8 filmstocks for the world market. The internet buzzed with a militant reaction which saw the circulation of a standard form letter of protest for mailing to Kodak CEO, George Fisher. Super 8 filmmakers everywhere debated the implications of the announcement as George Fisher drowned in a deluge of letters and emails decrying the decision. Losing the ability to record synchronous sound and picture with the deletion of magnetic sound-striped Kodachrome and Ektachrome stocks was seen by one cynical MS8FG member as yet another 'nail in the coffin' of Super 8:

This will have interesting implications for ... filmmakers who relied on the voice sync as integral to their work and implies a further marginalisation of Super 8 filmmaking generally as the gauge slips ever more steadily from view. Already Super 8 filmmaking is located outside of the main body of film art discourse and yet, like a stubborn zombie, it refuses to lay down and die. A reason for this longevity is the fact that all aspects of film craft can be brought to bear on a single roll of film, but with the demise of the sound stripe, strictly speaking, this is no longer the case. (O'Keefe, 1999, p. 4)

O'Keefe's reaction ran counter to the prevailing ideology underpinning 'indie' discourse which, above all, valued the (funky) 'look' of Super 8. In an opposite perspective, Francis (1999) noted the importance of the visual dimension of the medium in appealing to the style-centred visual focus of youth film culture:

film has been touted as the art form of the post-x generation as people's visual vocabularies come to surpass their verbal ones. The new image-based [Super 8] language, born of old as a bastion of consumerism, becomes gradually re-appropriated into a highly personal, but utilitarian form of expressionism (p. 6).

Feelings ran high as Eastman Kodak laboriously replied to all protest correspondence, receiving an unsolicited measurement of global Super 8 activity in the process. As it transpired, Kodak would win the battle to delete sound stocks, but the move to eliminate Ektachrome was both poorly researched and poorly timed. Kodak was no doubt hoping that consumers would be satisfied with the single remaining colour stock, Kodachrome. However, two things were wrong with that assumption.

Firstly, the centralisation of non-U.S. Kodachrome processing at the Palo Alto facility in California (soon to be followed by closure of that plant and relocation of the service to Switzerland) had already meant a wait of 4-6 weeks for processing for Australian and overseas customers. Ektachrome Super 8 film, unlike Kodachrome, was sold without processing. This made it the only colour film which could be locally processed by an independent laboratory with less than one week's turnaround. Thus many filmmakers working on Super 8 selected Ektachrome for pragmatic reasons rather than aesthetic ones.

Secondly came an issue of equity and aesthetics. While Kodak had committed to continue manufacturing two black and white stocks with quite different formal characteristics, colour consumers were now being offered a single, homogenised choice by a multinational monopoly supplier. Kodak's minimalist, economic-rationalist approach ignored an emerging consumer culture which now saw Super 8 as a professional training ground for the holy grail of 35mm production. 'Indie' Super 8 valued the opportunity to mimic 35mm cinematography, and that meant 'learned' debates about the aesthetic virtues of one stock over another, not simply the choice of brand 'A' because that was all that existed. Kodak's failure to recognise this was soon to lead to some considerable embarrassment at the hands of an unexpected rival in the manufacture and supply of Super 8 services and commodities. The effect of 'indie' youth film culture brought popular attention to Super 8 through events like the Metropolis Super 8 Film Festival. As a result, Super 8 was attracting renewed interest as an educational tool in film studies courses and beginning to make an increasing number of public appearances in professional film and television production.

The storm of protest created by the Ektachrome withdrawal debacle forced Kodak to take another look at its position on Super 8. Late in 1997, Eastman Kodak's Rochester headquarters announced a 'new' Ektachrome Super 8 stock which represented a compromise solution. This film was not really new, but a cut-down version of an existing 16mm colour reversal stock which required a chemical process already familiar to independent laboratories. Super 8 now had Rochester's full attention, attention which was turned towards a rather unexpected development in the cultural history of the Super 8 medium. A new competitor in Super 8 manufacture and processing had arrived in the mid-1990s, a development which had largely been dismissed by Eastman Kodak as a nostalgic aberration. By 1997, California-based Super 8 Sound Inc. was making a significant impact on the Super 8 scene – an impact which could no longer be ignored. Up until 1997, Super 8 production had largely taken place within a set of rules laid down by Kodak – with some negotiation from the margins. Then Super 8 Sound came along and moved the goalposts.

Enter 'Pro' Super 8

Kodak's vision for the commercial applications of Super 8 had always been about reduction-printing from 35mm and 16mm stocks to Super 8 for mass distribution. In an address given at the 1999 SMPTE conference, Kodak researcher Dr. Norwood L.

Simmons noted that the relatively low cost and accessibility of Super 8 projection equipment had provided the opportunity of marketing textual products to individual consumers for the first time:

As long as the motion picture was dependent on the 35mm or 16mm formats, it was only economically justified as a medium for reaching audiences in large or medium-sized groups. Now Super 8 promises to change all that. Once sound could be added successfully to 8mm film, the motion picture – for the first time – could also be considered as a medium for reaching the individual viewer or student. (in Lightman, 1969, p. 1165)

In truth, Standard 8 had already established this precedent with the wide availability of 8mm sound films for rental or purchase (see chapter 3). However, Dr. Simmons' vision extended beyond home entertainment into the area of corporate production, a vision which was shared by others. Standard 8 had been successful as an exhibition medium, but, as a production medium, recording synchronous sound had been fraught with difficulty. Williams (1975) praised the potential of Super 8 as a production medium, asserting that:

progressive individuals in education, business and industry, government and the medical profession have recognised that the new medium is an effective way to bring their messages to people in a highly effective, standardised and individualised manner. (p. 1253)

Williams goes on to champion examples of staff in government and private enterprise who had seized the opportunity to produce their own promotional, documentary, sales and training films in the pursuit of corporate goals. Manufacturers of Super 8 products, in an emulation of television technology, had by this time developed personal daylight viewers. As a response to the emerging domestic VHS video technology which featured a simple-to-load videocassette, Super 8 manufacturers had also developed a user-friendly film cartridge (displacing the traditional reel) for their desktop viewing devices.

The year 1975 marked ambiguous territory for visions of 'professional' Super 8. While video technologies had progressed strongly in the areas of broadcast and editing, video cameras remained prohibitively expensive and 'tube' technology struggled to cope with outdoor lighting conditions. This situation had kept 16mm film cameras in the

television news gathering business and prompted great advancements in film to video transfer technology - the 'telecine' process. No doubt with the corporate market in mind, Kodak had applied the same developments to the narrower gauge and now took Super 8 right to the leading edge of broadcast technology in 1975 as it released two new 'telecine' devices for Super 8, the TVM100A Super 8 Videofilm Projector and the VP-1 Film Video Player.

While the latter was envisaged as a corporate product "designed for use in schools, business, industry and government installations to play color and sound Super 8 movies over a standard colour television set or closed-circuit television system" (Williams, 1975, p. 1254), both began to be co-opted in the transfer of Super 8 sound and images to video for finishing on tape. In this moment, Super 8 emerged as an alternative to 16mm for low-budget production of documentary and news-style television programmes. It found popularity among emerging and community-based U.S. television stations without the financial resources to purchase 16mm cameras or video equipment. Independent producers likewise conceded the virtues of the narrower gauge. For television in the 1970s and early 1980s, the 500-plus lines of horizontal resolution of the Super 8 film image produced a very acceptable result through the telecine chain when screened on television or on the 240-line VHS video system. Lightman (1975) emphasised the 'overkill' aspect of shooting on larger formats for television distribution:

While one eye is looking through the viewfinder, the other eye must be looking at the image in the way the audience is going to see it. The fact is that, in terms of total viewing time, 90% of today's audiences are going to see film images on television screens with a maximum diagonal size of 25 inches. (p. 1252)

In Australia, the Leyland brothers started producing their weekly television travelogue show on the Super 8 medium and adventurer Dick Smith used Super 8 to record an around-the-world helicopter flight (Smith, 1983). Examples of self-produced, independent work like this prompted Williams to offer an utopian vision of a new, more democratic style of television news:

Super-8 sound film provides the first opportunity to produce local news, documentaries and commercials on location in color. It also allows television stations to reap a tremendous harvest of materials from stringers

and free-lancers. There are an estimated seven million small-format cameras in use in this country [America]. (Williams, 1975, p. 1254)

Even in 2003, Williams' utopian vision has failed to unfold as armies of amateur mini-digital video cameras patrol the world. Television news is still about gatekeeping and maintaining the professional-amateur divide. Amateur footage is always highlighted as such in subtitles and rarely included in television news – its place remains on reality TV programmes such as *Funniest Home Videos*. As discussed in chapter 2, Kodak and its industrial allies have always had a vested interest in separating the categories and activities of professional and amateur filmmakers as a means of propagating the privileged apparatus of Hollywood cinema and professional production. 1975 represented an uncomfortable moment of potential overlap of the amateur Super 8 and professional 16mm formats, a moment which, by 1985, was avoided by video's ultimate displacement of film in the corporate and television sectors. Development work continued on 16mm film emulsions as it remained popular as a production and exhibition medium for independent documentary and short film. Any further development of Super 8 film emulsions was arrested as the domestic market for Super 8 declined dramatically.

In a curious example of what might have passed as 'luddite' and rather anomalous behaviour, California-based Super 8 Sound, founded in the early 1970s, continued to live out the dream of 'professional' Super 8 articulated by medium proponents of the era such as the journals *Super 8 Filmmaker* and *American Cinematographer*. *American Cinematographer*, the international journal of motion picture photography and production techniques, became a champion of the professional potential of Super 8 from the very beginning. It announced in 1966 that the "new Super-8 format would not only enjoy a boom of popularity among amateur film-makers, but that it would ultimately come to be accepted as a professional medium, for certain specific applications" (Lightman, 1975, p. 1252). A special "state of the art" issue in 1969 found that Super 8 "still had some distance to go before its full [professional] potential will be reached" (Sutherland, 1969, p. 1240), but by 1975, the cover of a second special issue on the 'state of the art' proclaimed the medium as 'Professional' Super 8.

By 1975, Super 8 Sound Inc was firmly part of the professional Super 8 scene, a scene which had been propelled forward by major technological developments in synchronous sound recording and film-to-video transfer. Professional 16mm-style sound recording on a separate, synchronised sound device ('double-system') came to

the Super 8 medium in 1972, developed by veteran documentary-maker Richard Leacock. Kodak released its in-camera sound recording system which used a magnetic stripe at the edge of the film ('single-system') in 1973. Super 8 Sound founder Robert Doyle had developed professional sound recording and editing equipment based on Leacock's 'double-system' model and was a leading supplier of Super 8 equipment to the corporate and professional market throughout the 1970s.

Super 8 Sound's expertise in film-to-video transfer responded to filmmakers unable to afford to work on higher formats and recognised Super 8's capacity to resolve at a high level of detail on television while retaining the film 'look'. A curious aspect of the film vs. video debate is the capacity of the filmic image to retain its 'aura' and aesthetic even when transferred to the video 'other' (Turner, 1987). Blow-up to 16mm or 35mm was another matter. Super 8 reversal stocks are high contrast, short latitude stocks designed as projection originals. This worked against producing Super 8 features for release on 35mm, but the economics of shooting for television and/or video release on Super 8 rather than 16mm meant savings of 60-70% (Frazier, 1990).

As domestic Super 8 declined in the late 1970s with improvements in video technology which displaced film from corporate, television and documentary production, so did the fortunes of Super 8 Sound which had continued to service a shrinking market of home movies, student work and the occasional low-budget feature or documentary destined for television or video release. A broader vision of Super 8's future in the video age inspired new owner Philip Vigeant's acquisition of the ailing organisation "for nothing" in 1986 (Tierney, 1990, p. 50).

Vigeant's acquisition of Super 8 Sound coincided with the emergence of the indie, youth-orientated, anti-video aesthetic sensibility which began to permeate popular visual culture. As youth-orientated advertising and music clips attempted to incorporate a new 'low-res' sensibility informed by the aesthetics of postmodern 'bricolage', (Dovey, 1995) "professional cinematographers avidly experimented with methods to achieve degraded images, grain-rich textures and surreal colours" (Williams, 1996, p. 28). This led to the extensive use of Super 8 on American television, including drama, commercials, music videos and even as 'inserts' in 35mm feature films such as *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese), 1980, *Black Rain* (Ridley Scott, 1989), *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991) and *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994).

A similar pattern followed in Australia as ABC television produced a series of "Our ABC" station promos on Super 8, the popular soap *Neighbours* incorporated it into their opening credits and popular bands such as Spiderbait began to produce music clips exclusively on the medium. Emma-Kate Croghan incorporated a Super 8 sequence into her low-budget 'indie' feature, *Love and Other Catastrophes*. Before 1985, Super 8 Sound in America had participated in one or two Super 8 features in each year. In 1989, the company saw over 30 Super 8 features in the no or low-budget category go into production (Frazier, 1989). As 'name' directors began to embrace the medium in the 1990s, Super 8 Sound's CEO Vigeant embarked on an audacious plan which outmanoevred Kodak in the best traditions of corporate one-upmanship.

Much has been made of the superior quality of the 35mm image over 16mm, and the superior quality of 16mm over Super 8mm. Advances in the chemistry and crystalline structure of negative film emulsions have seen the 'gap' narrow between 16mm and 35mm for the measured standard of the conventionally-sized cinema screen. As video displaced 16mm production in the budget-conscious world of documentary and television production, the number of 16mm reversal stocks receded and were replaced by a new generation of technologically advanced negative film stocks with enhanced resolution, exposure latitude and colour response. Serious 'indie' production (when sponsored by arts funding) began to be encouraged on the 'Super 16' medium ('widescreen' 16mm in a 16:9 aspect ratio) – today's standard for digital high definition television. The outstanding resolution of these stocks has also permitted 'blow-up' to 35mm for theatrical release without any appreciable loss of definition. When transferred to video for screening on television or distribution through VHS or DVD rental, the difference between 16mm and 35mm is difficult to detect.

Super 8's stagnation since the 1970s had marooned it as a medium of nostalgia with all the post-production difficulties posed by being 'reversal' film. In an accelerated catch-up strategy, Vigeant decided to apply 20 years of 35mm motion picture emulsion development to the humble gauge of Super 8! He firstly purchased a sample of the latest generation of negative 35mm stocks from Eastman Kodak. Then, by cobbling together items of equipment from various third-party manufacturers, and through sourcing a Russian-made reloadable version of the Super 8 cassette, Vigeant slit, re-perforated and loaded a selection of Eastman 35mm stocks into the 'outlaw' cartridges. He followed this up by establishing a fully-integrated Super 8 production service which offered processing, transfer to video and blow-up to larger formats at a far more attractive rate than 16mm laboratories could offer. In a single, masterful, exploitative

stroke, Vigeant had created 'professional' Super 8 - and succeeded in awakening Kodak's 'worst nightmare'.

The arrival of 'Pro' 8 challenged Kodak's hierarchy of gauges and led to a homogenisation, rather than differentiation, of formats. It professionalised Super 8 by breaking through barriers which Kodak had either been unwilling, or unable, to test. Super 8 Sound's re-packaging of some negative stocks, later to be followed by a comprehensive service offering to load any film into a Super 8 cassette, meant that the same professional stocks were now available on 35mm, 16mm and 8mm. Super 8's 'look' was no longer defined by a select number of 'nostalgia' filmstocks as it was incorporated into the same post-production systems and technologies which manipulated the look of 35mm to cater for the director and audience-driven stylistic imperatives of mainstream cinema. American professional Super 8 cinematographer Shandor Black notes that texture has replaced nostalgia as the focus of audience interest in the Super 8 image:

People often comment on the impressionistic feeling of Super 8 there's an inherent warmth and textural quality to the format in recent years viewers have become less interested in clarity and more interested in suggestion – esoteric and ethereal looks what's interesting is that Super 8 wasn't necessarily used in these cases as a nostalgic device, but as a textural one. (in Williams, 1996, pp. 29-30)

Eastman Kodak would do well to promote this culture of grain and texture. 'Indie' director Jim Jarmusch, possibly the first director since Antonioni (*China*, 1965) to shoot a feature documentary on Super 8 (*Year of the Horse*, 1997) and blow it up to 35mm for theatrical release, complained about the high resolution of 'Pro' 8, which he saw as being too close to the look of 16mm. Jarmusch instructed the post-production house to accentuate the texture of the film to provide a "raw, grainy look" (Rudolph, 1997, p. 16). 'Pro' 8's proximity to the image quality of 'higher' formats is not necessarily a good thing for Kodak in a cost environment where "for every minute of 35mm footage, you can get 15 minutes on Super 8" (Finn, in Rhea & Pizzello, 1994, p. 80).

Just as the 'professionalisation' of 16mm after the second world war (Winston, 1996; Zimmermann, 1995) impacted Kodak's business (for the better), it follows that the professionalisation of Super 8 will also make some impact, for better or worse. The professionalisation of 16mm in the 1950s left the 'amateur' field to 8mm, which still

provided a hierarchy of gauges with which to manufacture discursive distinctions around amateur and professional production and practice. The effect of 'elevating' Super 8 to professional status is to eliminate any discursive construction of filmmaking as amateur practice. Production in the medium of the video 'other' then becomes amateur practice.

For Kodak, whose business has been built on mass sales of amateur film and photographic products, there has been some reluctance to leave the discourse of amateur filmmaking. Nonetheless, in 1998 Kodak created a Super 8 section in its Professional Motion Picture Imaging website (Kattelle, 2000, p. 214), thereby renegotiating its spectrum of gauges in terms of a discursive hierarchy of professionalism. The website's index page introduced Super 8 in this way:

As students of the art, many of today's professional filmmakers created their first films with Super 8. Thirty years later, this small-gauge medium still provides an easy, inexpensive way for students and enthusiasts to work at film resolutions and color depths that are still unmatched by the latest video technologies. (Kodak Motion Pictures Website, 2000)

Some two years earlier, Kodak had contracted to supply Super 8 Sound with Eastman plastic film cartridges to replace the Russian versions. Finally, in 2001, Kodak released its first truly new Super 8 stock in more than 25 years as it listed Vision 200T negative film on its Super 8 catalogue. At this time, the four reversal stocks also remain on the market.

Kodak, as a monopoly supplier of motion picture film and equipment, has been caught up in a social and institutional structure which has sought to distinguish between professional and leisure activities, cinema and home movies, privileged art practice and mass consumption. Super 8 has occupied an ambiguous position for Kodak from its very beginnings when Kodak research personnel announcing its introduction stressed its potential for professional applications (Lightman, 1969). Yet, significantly, the website still prefers to speak of students and enthusiasts rather than professionals. Kodak's close alliance to Hollywood 35mm feature production and its associated group-based production methodology employing large numbers of hierarchically-organised production specialists operates in direct opposition to the attitudes of members of the professional Super 8 nouveau like Jim Jarmusch:

We decided to use Super 8 because it was so free and mobile ... we could just pop in cassettes and shoot constantly without having to load magazines. And that liberated us aesthetically ... instead of being as careful and restrained as we probably would have been on 16mm (Jarmusch, in Williams, 1996, p. 30)

While professional Super 8 with its vastly more favourable economics of production will never replace the institutionally-protected 35mm format, the improving technologies around Super 8 certainly have the potential to erode some proportion of Kodak's sales of 16mm stocks. It is certainly in Eastman Kodak's interests to limit this potential, and perhaps assists to explain why the company has desisted from offering more than one negative stock at this time.

The professional Super 8 experience in Australia has been somewhat different. A Melbourne agent began to market 'Pro-8mm' stocks in 2000, but the falling Australian dollar and the absence of a dedicated laboratory service like those now established by Super 8 Sound in the U.S. and the U.K. worked against any serious uptake of negative film. Thus professional Super 8 in Australia has remained reversal Super 8, a situation which doesn't seem to have deterred local video clip makers like Gerasimos Grammenos:

I've come to really cherish the embraceable quality of Super 8. Like any film stock, there is a solidity and depth that cannot be supplemented by anything short of the most expensive video-manipulating software. (2000, p. 3)

This situation continues as current Channel 10 station promos feature personalities shot on a variety of gauges including reversal Super 8, and recent TV ads for a cosmetic brand and 'Baker's Delight' exploit the grain and texture of the medium. However, while Super 8 thrived in television and feature film applications, alternative film groups like the Melbourne Super 8 Film Group have struggled to maintain a culture of projecting camera originals in the face of the rise of desktop digital post-production.

MS8FG – Digital Dilemma

As 'indie' Super 8 began the transition to 'pro' Super 8 with its focus on digital post-production and exhibition on the video medium, and the wider availability of digital video cameras and more affordable desktop digital editing technologies stimulated avant-garde, experimental and underground work on the video medium, the Melbourne Super 8 Film group began a period of ultimately destructive self-analysis. Articles in the *Super Eight* newsletter began to question the sustainability of their medium-specific art practice, and to offer strategic alternatives to ensure the group's ongoing survival. Members separated themselves into one of two camps – an essentialist position that the group was fundamentally about production and exhibition on the 'pure' medium of Super 8, or that Super 8 was now part of a wider alternative production practice which embraced a postmodern, multi-media approach.

As early as 1996, MS8FG member Dirk de Bruyn praised the medium's role in establishing the group's vibrant independent film culture, but warned against a continued media-specific approach:

The Super 8 barrier has served the group well in developing its identity, reinforcing its low budget, independent, self help and artist base these ideas of texture, working at the margins, single frame pixilation, time-lapse, home movie, low budget, the relationship between Artist and Witness are not only happening in Super 8 ... such film art practice – or should I say moving image manipulation – is not in the long run served by artificial barriers which fragment such a community's culture. In the end it stunts its growth. (1996, p. 8)

In 1997, the group's July open screening featured Super 8 works which had been funded by group's long-term funding sponsor, the Australian Film Commission. Program notes indicated that the films had been finished variously on video, 16mm and 35mm film and presented some early warning signs about the AFC's emerging position on Super 8 culture:

The intimacy, intensity and lyrical potential of super 8, with further enhancement of its qualities through post-production on other gauges and media, plays a central role in the creation of these redolent constructions. In funding these films, the AFC has recognised the imaginative efficacy of

super 8 as an originating medium, the aesthetic and exhibition possibilities afforded by the post-production formats, and has supported their realisation through initiatives such as the No Frills Fund and the more recent New Image Research Program. (Ball, 1997a, p. 1)

This screening broke with the MS8FG tradition of projecting Super 8 originals which still governed the activities of the group. In 1999, the Australian Film Commission withdrew funding support for the Melbourne Super 8 Film Group as it sought to support initiatives around the new technologies of digital imaging and rationalise funding for alternative filmmaking within a body encompassing a variety of formats. The immediate effect of this funding withdrawal was to restrict the group's financial flexibility, but paradoxically the short-term effect was to stimulate the breadth of activity of the group. Membership increased to 100 in 1999 and the group's annual Super 8 festival, in its 10th year, was its most successful for some time.

However, 2000 and 2001 saw declining membership and funding restrictions reduce the number of open screenings held by the group. Variouslly blamed on withdrawal of AFC funding, the advent of digital video, the proliferation of screen culture events, the ascendance of individualism over a communal 'club' ethos, or the end of the natural 'life cycle' of an organisation, the group began to sense the inevitability of its demise. In a final celebration of the vitality and creativity exhibited in its heyday, the MS8FG assembled a retrospective of Melbourne Super 8 filmmaking between 1982 and 2001, screening a 44 film program as part of the Melbourne Underground Film Festival in July, 2001. It disbanded in December, 2001.

The demise of the last bastion of 'alternative' Super 8 filmmaking and Kodak's discursive reclamation of the medium marked a decisive moment and turning point in the cultural history of Super 8 filmmaking. 'Indie' Super 8 languished in the shadow of the new digital other - "trampled under the large foot of mini-DV" (Rudd, 2001a, p. 13) and remained restricted by cost to those nostalgic reversal stocks which the professional Super 8 nouveau now eschewed in favour of the new range of negative 35mm clone stocks. New questions about Super 8 culture now present themselves in the 21st century. Has 'Pro-8mm' de-essentialised and de-politicised the Super 8 medium and if not, does a traditional oppositional Super 8 culture have an ongoing role to play in the digital domain? These are the questions we reach with the concluding chapter of this project – *Super 8 Futures: Pro 8 and Beyond*.

CONCLUSION

Super 8 Futures: 'Pro 8' and Beyond

With [Super] 8mm we have the possibility to ... develop a cinema that is truly oppositional which offers an alternative that is not governed by one particular ideology but is diverse and ongoing and thereby safeguards its own existence. It is the very promiscuous nature of [Super] 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.
(Hudson, 1998, pp. 9-10)

The above media-centric statement by Laura Hudson, director of the 1996 London Filmmakers Co-op Super 8 film Festival, *Viva 8*, appears at first sight to fall into the trap of a media-specificity argument (Carroll, 1996). Attributing Super 8's longevity to its essential "promiscuous nature", however, offers a bit more scope than fixing particular subjects and styles toward which Super 8 production might be 'appropriately' directed.

This cultural history of Super 8 filmmaking has viewed the medium as a contested site upon which various agencies at various times have been able to privilege their discursive constructions of what it means to engage in Super 8 practice. Thus far, this project has been concerned with what has kept the medium alive as it progresses, somewhat surprisingly, toward its 40th birthday. Claims for the 'essential nature' of Super 8 are at odds with the main argument of this work, which has suggested that the meanings and pleasures of Super 8 production and reception have shifted with each succeeding dominant phase of Super 8 culture. While previous phases have continued to co-exist, each succeeding dominant phase of Super 8 culture has redefined the industrial and social context of textual production and reception in the medium.

Hudson's description of Super 8 as "a cinema that is truly oppositional" seems at odds with an additional assertion that "what [Super] 8mm has, above all other amateur formats, is the possibility to be incorporated into any other media" (1998, p. 5). Incorporation smacks of submission, assimilation and defeat rather than opposition and intervention. Is not Super 8 Sound's re-deployment of Super 8 into mainstream Hollywood production through the physical transformation of the medium into a 35mm

'clone' the ultimate example of incorporation by dominant institutional structures? It could be argued that the key word in Hudson's statement is 'incorporation'. One perspective on the cultural history of Super 8 is to see each new dominant phase of Super 8 as having incorporated the style and content of the previous phase. Thus home movie style was re-articulated in the personal, oppositional cinema of the MS8FG, and 'indie' Super 8 (particularly in contemporary music clips) incorporated both home movie style and avant-garde techniques.

However, Hudson offers the further suggestion that Super 8 "is infused with a promiscuous nature which has the ability to transcend the limitations imposed upon it" (1998, p. 5). This is perhaps less about its unique nature and more about its origins as an amateur medium. It seems that 'amateur' media always live in a state of tension with their binary opposite, 'professional' media. Desire is in place on one side of the equation, but not on the other. To make the transition from amateur to professional is a sign of upward mobility, to go in the other direction is a loss of status. As we have seen in Chapter 2, there are always constraints in place to maintain the amateur-professional divide, but the very nature of laying down constraints is to engender a spirit of oppositional behaviour, to encourage users of amateur media to find a way to 'professionalise' their activities over time. Thus, with the help of some external influences, 16mm motion picture film made the transition from an amateur to a professional medium.

At one level, Super 8 seems to be on the same path, but its 'promiscuity' relates to the traces of its past phases, phases which may not be dominant but continue to exist. It maintains a kind of ambiguity. Paradoxically, Eastman Kodak may have declared Super 8 (in its catalogue, anyway) to be a professional medium, but it continues to market nostalgic 'home movie' stocks at affordable prices instead of superior negative products at a 'professional' price. As noted in the previous chapter, this may have something to do with avoiding erosion of its own 16mm sales, but while this continues, some chance of an oppositional Super 8 film practice persists.

That practice continues in Australian festival events like Perth's Pandora's Box Super 8 Film Festival, Adelaide's Shoot the Fringe and Melbourne's White Gloves. These events celebrate the possibility of alternatives to mainstream television and cinema. At an international level, Flicker (see <http://www.flicker.com>) represents a global network of independent groups dedicated to originating and screening work on Super 8 and 16mm film.

While the advent of cheaper digital mini video equipment and affordable desktop editing platforms has radically transformed the amateur production landscape (the subject of a thesis in its own right), Flickr remains an oppositional reaction to the omni-presence of video and the endless cycle of consumption of new, improved digital technologies – “there’s a romance to film that video lacks, which is why, no matter how many DV cams end up under the Christmas tree this year, there’s a growing groundswell of underground filmmakers devoted to the simple pleasures of Super-8 filmmaking” (Savlov, 2001, p.1).

While digital video has become firmly established as a domestic production technology, it is no longer the ‘new kid on the block’ superseding troublesome, expensive analogue video technologies. De Bruyn (1997) suggests that boredom with the digital video aesthetic is the end result of a natural cycle where familiarity breeds contempt – “it is only a matter of time before filmic visual art is re-emphasised, before interest in it is re-ignited” (p. 5). The consummate ease of digital video production in the home highlights the ‘otherness’ of film/filmmakers and draws attention to lost primal elements of craft displaced by the fully automated, constantly reliable, instantly gratifying digital video camera. Digital video appears to be locked in a battle for an ever-sharper, more highly resolved image which for some, “emits a certain ‘9 volt battery to the tongue effect” (Rudd, 1999, p. 4). Norwood Cheek, head of the Los Angeles chapter of Flickr, takes this critique of ‘hi-res’ video culture further:

I love the graininess of film, it’s like a pointillist painting. It’s organic, you can treat it like a plant. I can make a bath of tea, put my film in, and I can’t shower for three days because my film is staining. It’s more of a hands-on experience. (in Malcolm, 2000, p.1)

‘Lo-res’, low-tech, touchy-feely Super 8 culture keeps coming back. The Melbourne Super 8 Film Group may have passed into history in 2001, but 2003 has seen the re-establishment of the Sydney Super 8 Group as “a loose umbrella under which experimental filmmakers and artists interested in the Super 8 medium can show their work and cultivate multi-media endeavours with other practitioners” (Edwards, 2003, p. 10). This sounds a bit like the formula which spelled the end of the MS8FG, but perhaps reflects a change in the production ethos of visual culture which now values the possibility of drawing on many varied artistic palettes in the creation of an artistic work. Documentary maker Errol Morris is a leading proponent of what he calls the “kitchen sink approach”:

Much of what is great in photography is what the photograph or image does not show, as well as what is presented You should employ all of these textures and resolutions in a movie. Fine grain 35, grainy 35, 16, Super 16, Hi 8, Super 8, video transfer to film, infrared, black and white, color reversal, color negative. You name it ... anything goes. There is a whole pallet, not just of colors and shapes, but textures as well. (Interview with Errol Morris, 2000, p. 3)

I am reminded of Hudson's quote above about the strength of Super 8 as a medium which is available to be incorporated by others. The act of incorporation also offers the possibility of infiltration and subversion.

Additionally, 'indie' filmmaking still embraces Super 8. The 2003 Revelation Independent Film Festival featured *Northwest*, a low budget skate film shot on Super 8 and finished on video. The original 'nostalgia' stocks with their connotations of otherness (especially in comparison to the Hollywood overtones of 'Pro-8'), lend themselves to representation of ongoing counter-culture activities like skating and surfing which had their origins in the 1960s.

The physical limits of future oppositional Super 8 production will be determined by the supply of filmstock and the availability of reliable camera equipment. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the key relationship for the self-funded amateur is with the supplier of filmstock and processing rather than, in the case of commercial production, a studio or funding body. While Super 8 Sound Inc provides new and remanufactured professional Super 8 cameras at premium prices, the rest of us are using cameras which are often more than 30 years old. While they remain a testament to the manufacturers who produced them, there will be a natural limit to their operating lives. This may well, in the end, provide a rationale (which can't be challenged) for Eastman Kodak to cease production of reversal stocks.

The legacy of Super 8 will be the millions of home movies, alternative and independent films which will represent a cultural history bank of significant proportions. The commercial and cultural value of Kodachrome movie film, reckoned to have a shelf-life in excess of 100 years, is already being recognised in the formation of home movie archives and the inclusion of Super 8 footage in documentary productions. Crimmings (2003) comments on the latent status of this cultural mother-lode:

Through projections in living rooms and bedrooms all over the world, these abundant quotidian moments are harvested, processed and preserved only then to be stored away in dark, enclosed places – pantries, garages, wardrobes – for eventual retrieval and remembering in a distant future. (p. 37)

While the context of these films may be lost to viewers who come to them without the extra-textual, intimate knowledge of family characters and histories underlying them (Holland, 1997, Boeck, 1997a), this is of little concern to found footage filmmakers like Hungarian Péter Forgács, whose documentaries are entirely composed from home movies of the 1930s and 1940s. His films about oppressed and displaced people during World War II, *Free Fall* (1998) and *Danube Exodus* (1999), are poetic pieces which "evoke a sense of what past experiences were like for those who lived them" (Nichols, 2001, p. 134). Nichols goes on to explain that Forgács' "reworks the footage, cropping images, slowing down motion, adding titles and music, to combine a sense of historical perspective with a form of emotional engagement" (p. 136). Super 8 is just waiting for this future appropriation into a documentary form which runs counter to traditional expository modes.

The work of Zimmermann (1995) and Kattelle (2000) has been a valuable contribution to the cultural history of Super 8 filmmaking. However, this is a story which continues to unfold in Australia and around the globe. 'Small movies' remain an alternative to both the perceived banality of consumer-driven home video and the complicity of the Hollywood production machine, or as Flicker member Tom Griffin (from the Austin, Texas chapter) puts it very simply, Super 8 continues to offer "a celebration of microcinema and DIY filmmaking" (in Savlov, 2001, p. 5).

The cultural history of amateur filmmaking will conclude with the eventual demise of Super 8. However, the cultural history of amateur video also presents itself as a field in which there has been little, if any, theorisation. Mini digital video, a medium already shared by both professionals and home video makers, stands on very ambiguous territory with its current claim to democratic potential – a claim waiting to be investigated in further work in the area of amateur screen production.

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