

QUICK TIME: The Revenge of Super 8

DUNLOP ART GALLERY, REGINA

MARCH 4 - APRIL 22, 2000

by Greg Beatty

Long before camcorders turned everyone into budding Steven Spielbergs (or potential contestants on *America's Funniest Home Videos*), Super 8 cameras permitted families to record weddings, birthdays, vacations, and other special events on film. Surprisingly, Super 8 did not disappear with the advent of video. Artists continue to be attracted by its aesthetic superiority.

In a lecture accompanying the opening of *Quick Time: The Revenge of Super 8*, guest curator Su Ditta noted that the history of presenting experimental film in Canadian museums and art galleries was limited. In fact, one of the impetuses for *Quick Time* was Ditta's admitted failure as the National Gallery of Canada's Media Arts curator to show film in public galleries. She explained that although visual art institutions are generally familiar with the discourse surrounding video, they have almost no familiarity with the discourse surrounding film. As one example of this ostracism, Ditta stated that at the Canada Council, where she served as Head of the Media Arts Section, Super 8 filmmakers are not eligible for grants. When she questioned the Council's rationale for this policy, she was told that it was due to the difficulty of distinguishing between amateur and professional work—yet the Council distinguishes between home video and video art.

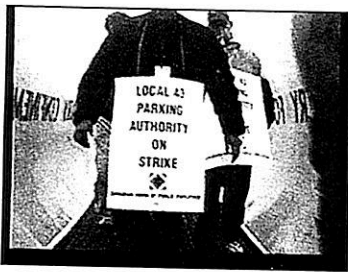
According to Ditta, artists first used Super 8 in the late 1960s to craft chronicles of personal identity, such as visual diaries and travelogues, and to conduct formal experiments involving light, shadow, and movement. Later, excerpts from decades-old home movies began appearing in the work of film and video

artists intent on exploring issues of family, history, and memory. While Ditta's *Quick Time* selections allude to Super 8's home movie tradition in terms of form (i.e., shots taken from car windows, people acting up in front of the camera), she said she was particularly interested in work with a radical political sensibility. Family archives of Super 8 reels, like the even more ubiquitous family photo album, bestow an institutional authenticity on the representation of a largely white, heterosexual, middle-class identity. In the 18 films selected for *Quick Time*, the artists used the same archival/documentary cachet to legitimize marginalized identities; sexual, political, ethnic, and otherwise.

As originally conceived, the *Quick Time* films were to be cinematically screened in the Dunlop Art Gallery. Unfortunately, Super 8's fragility and the artists' reluctance to part with their original prints precluded this from happening. Instead, all the films were transferred to video. They were divided into four categories: *Rebels With a Cause*, *Troubled Hearts(?)*: *Sex, Love and the Politics of Desire*, *The Personal is Political*, and *Mixed Estates: Place, Culture and Identity*.

One gem from the first category was Kika Thorne's *Oct. 25 + 26, 1996* (1996) which documents an act of resistance undertaken by a group of Toronto activists during the "Metro Days of Action" against the Harris government. In the midst of a general strike, they erected an inflatable plastic shelter atop a 50-metre air vent at City Hall to dramatize the plight of the homeless and, in the face of harassment from security guards, challenge exclusionary notions of public versus private space.

Also of note in the *Rebels With a Cause* category was Penelope Buitenhuis's *They Shoot Pigs Don't They?* (1989) which was inspired by an incident of police brutality in New York similar to the 1999 slaying of Amadou Diallo. In Buitenhuis's film, radical feminists seize control of a television station and broadcast a manifesto calling for an armed rebellion against police authority. By Hollywood standards, *They Shoot Pigs Don't They?* was cheesy. But as Buitenhuis noted during a panel discussion, to criticize the work on that basis implies that a set standard



exists by which representation is credible. She suggested that by privileging means of production over content, we enshrine a hierarchy of representation based largely on wealth.

Of the five films in *Troubled Hearts (?)*: Sex, Love and the Politics of Desire, the most haunting was Scott Beveridge's *Quiver* (1999). Depicting the violent beating and subsequent rape of one man by another, the film posited disparate readings. On one hand, it appeared to address the subject of consensual masochistic sex. More palatable was a metaphorical reading in which the film articulated the physical and psychological damage done to gay males by homophobia; a destructive phenomenon which finds its most extreme expression in gay-bashing. (*Quiver* illustrated another dilemma galleries face when programming film and video; namely, its visceral quality in comparison to still/silent images. This has led to problems of censorship and public acrimony for galleries as well as for alternative film festivals.) More light-hearted was Barbara Mainguy's *Brides Run Amok* (1998) which portrayed the exploits of a gang of licentious brides on the lam after abandoning their respective grooms at the altar.

While most films in the first two categories were relatively ambitious in terms of scale of production (i.e., large casts and plenty of location shooting), films in *The Personal is Political* section were generally smaller in scope, emphasizing Super 8's value as an intimate tool for self-expression. In *My Feet and Freedom From the Inside Out* (1999), for example, Venus Soberanes focussed her camera on people's feet as they walked along a Vancouver street. Coupled with commentary on the practice of footbinding in feudal China, the film effectively highlighted the oppressive nature of media-driven ideals of female beauty. Even more spare was Joyce Wieland's classic *Water Sark* (1966). Shot entirely in Wieland's kitchen, it was described by Ditta as "an exquisite essay on the construction of the domestic landscape."

As the one film category not infused with an activist agenda, *Mixed Estates: Place, Culture and Identity* contained the most poetic offerings. Chief

among them was Gerald Saul's *25 Short Films In and About Saskatchewan* (1999). Laden with lush prairie imagery drawn from a variety of rural and urban sources and augmented by a classical music score and Saul's own diaristic musings about living and working in Saskatchewan, the film was reminiscent in structure to *Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (1994). Coming at a time when Saskatchewan's economic and political viability is in jeopardy due to globalization and out-migration, it took viewers on an epic journey into the province's very soul.

Striking from a formal perspective was Garine Torossian's *The Girl from Moush* (1994) in which frames of Super 8 film were inserted in a 16-mm film to create a compelling, multi-layered evocation of diasporatic longing. Born in Lebanon of Armenian parentage, and now resident in Toronto, Torossian has never visited her ancestral home of Moush in Turkey. In the film, she constructs a vision of Moush from images culled from her family's archive of home movies.

In her lecture, Ditta conceded the struggle that galleries encounter in winning acceptance for time-based media where viewers must sit and watch. While Saul's Saskatchewan elegy was 80 minutes long, most of the others clocked in at under ten minutes. So the burden on gallery-goers was not unduly onerous. Only Thorne's benefitted from being shown on a large-screen television. The others were shown on monitors installed at viewing stations. Admittedly, Ditta did try to soften the viewing experience by introducing thematic elements into each station's design. In *Troubled Hearts?*, for example, a futon was provided for viewers to sit on. In *The Personal is Political*, a domestic scene was evoked through a kitchen table and chair. Nevertheless, gallery facilitators reported that, like guests declining an invitation to sit through a showing of turgid home movies, many Dunlop Art Gallery patrons demurred when invited to insert a tape into one of the VCRs. ♦

Greg Beatty writes about art from Regina.