



Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

1990

Fragile imprints mediated resistances

Tuer, Dot

Suggested citation:

Tuer, Dot (1990) Fragile imprints mediated resistances. *C Magazine*, 26. pp. 14-19. ISSN 1193-8625 Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/877/>

Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.

The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at repository@ocadu.ca.



John Porter; *Swinging*; 1981; 2 min. Photo: the artist

FRAGILE IMPRINTS MEDIATED RESISTANCES

BY DOT TUER

There is a silence that precedes a rupture in a cultural paradigm, an uneasy silence in which discourse fragments, boundaries shift, the social fabric that sustains a context for reception fractures. Super-8 cinema, as a medium of artistic expression and collective vision, appears to find itself inside such an eerie vacuum. Increasing difficulties in obtaining raw materials and a disintegrating network of exhibition and distribution are the concrete manifestations of the art form's crisis. Less tangible, more obscure, is the diagnosis of the symptoms. Like a patient in an oxygen tent who strains to interpret the signals of a heartbeat between life and death, the Super-8 artist is caught inside a celluloid cocoon, struggling to decipher the crackling of telecommunication cables and the hiss of satellite transmissions: the white noises of an electronic feedback that signal a past unravelling, a future not yet woven.

Inundated by the static of the information revolution, Super-8 appears fragile and antique, nostalgic and out-of-sync. The potential for its saturated colours and dream-drenched images to enhance a dialectic of illusion and imagination recedes like a faint mirage upon the horizon. The idealistic expectation of a cultural practice that would rupture the vertical structures of a commercial cinema, demystifying an entangled web of ideology and technique, evaporates like water in a searing desert heat. Embodying the vulnerability of an art form whose dependence on a market technology simultaneously gave birth to its possibilities and engineered its demise, Super-8 cinema as an art form has faded to a tenuous marginality as we enter the last decade of the century.

But to abandon Super-8 to a diagnosis of obsolescence, declaring instead the cool refractions of the video lens, the simulated graphics of the computer screen, the art forms of the future by the sheer virtue of

their technological relevance, leads, in my opinion, to a labyrinth where the minotaur is no longer half-man, half-beast, but half-man, half-machine. I wish to return later to this labyrinth where technology and ideology, amnesia and history, the body and its mediated phantom collide. For the moment, however, I will pause at the entrance of the maze, to consider what Super-8, as an anachronism of the digital era, contributes to our understanding of a relationship between lightweight technology and art, to define the past before I venture to speculate upon an uncertain future.

Super-8's emergence as a home-movie format did not give rise to an independent cinema in North America. Rather, it was the availability of 16mm Bolex cameras, developed as a portable tool to record World War II, that were utilized by artists to forge experimental forms, to propose an investigation of the image as a material object, to infuse a cinematic landscape with motion, to decompose and recompose the structural parameters of cinematic time and space. Super-8, I would argue, offered another possibility, becoming for the artists of my generation the potential to usurp a consumer product, to propose a populist cinema in a participatory rather than narrative sense, to turn the tables on both an industrial model and the perceived austerity of an art-cinema, to literally turn the documentation of reality on its head with a medium so cheap that someone on unemployment could make a film and a camera so light it could be hooked to a fishing line or hugged to the body to produce a seamless synchronicity. With Super-8, the artist became a magician, spinning illusion, creating a carnivalesque context for mediation, playing tricks with perception that also revealed the secrets of the craft.

John Porter, a Canadian artist who works exclusively in Super-8, becomes an example of just such a trickster: a conjurer of magic who

uses the Super-8 camera to both frame and edit himself and his vision of a mediated reality. A master of animation, Porter choreographs his body to the rhythms of the camera's mobility in his series entitled, *Camera Dances*. Turning the concept of home movies as a documentation of the familiar into an obsession with history, Porter has produced over 100 *Condensed Rituals*, time-lapse three-minute segments of typically Canadian events that use not his own body but the flow of crowds to create from the patterns of human interaction social and cultural vignettes.¹ As a Super-8 artist John Porter has also ceaselessly promoted the availability of the medium, holding Open Screenings, first at the Funnel, and then at A-Space,² and documenting the history of Super-8 activity in Toronto through still photography and archival research.³ In organizing the second of two workshop screenings for the development of an erotic film language at A-Space, in which the participants included a black lesbian collective, a stripper and a collective of homosexual male artists, Porter grappled with the issues of sexuality, race, and class which had entered the Toronto film and video communities as issues concerning the means of production rather than as prescription for representation⁴.

John Porter, when asked how he will respond to the threat of Super-8's obsolescence, replies that he is moving even further away from the entrance of technology's labyrinth, moving towards hand-made flipbooks and pen and paper to produce work independent of market demands.⁵ Proposing to circumvent the information age altogether as a statement of self-determined representation, Porter's refusal to capitulate to the paradoxes of technology offers a moment of resistance, of reflection. It is in Porter's practice as a film and community artist that I would like to pose a reference point as I myself prepare to enter the labyrinth of the



(left to right) John Porter; *Drive-In Movies*; 1981; 7min. *Amusement Park*; 1978/79 6 min. *On The Waterfront*; 1978-82; 15 min. Photos: the artist

digital era. I would like to carry with me the memory of a fragile imprint that anchors light-weight technology within a contextual space where aesthetic and social parameters intersect, much the same as Katerina Thomadaki and Maria Klonaris's work in Super-8 grounds itself in a conceptual space where theoretical concerns play themselves out in the process of encounters, their workshop series, *Portraits of Women By Women*, offering a mirror where the texture of the body is transposed upon the fabric of the body politic.⁶

Jean Baudrillard has suggested that once inside the labyrinth of an electronic landscape, there is no theory of the media adequate to account for the spiralling implications of a technology that is moving at an incremental speed beyond human consciousness. Offering up McLuhan as a corporate mystic and Marx as a materialist idealist, Baudrillard declares their polar positions

incapable of accounting for the paradox of an economy dematerializing, an increasingly vociferous consumption of commodities and the proliferation of TV wiring the viewer to a passive reception of images that homogenize form and package content. Baudrillard, of course, went on to theorize upon his own conception of a media-saturated reality, declaring that both the body and the body politic have fragmented inside a simulacrum where fact and fiction blurred, where history disappeared and politics ended.⁷ Without engaging the polemics of a Baudrillarian discourse, I would nevertheless like to suggest that the artist who works with the "new mediums" of technology finds her/him inside this simulacrum, that while video and computer art are in no immediate danger of obsolescence, they are no less vulnerable to late-capitalism's game with technology.

Video art, which finds its origins

in the portapak developed for use of airborne military reconnaissance in the Vietnam war, was appropriated by artists to explore the sculptural qualities of an instantaneous playback, to imagine the possibilities of an interactive system of the body and communication. Linked to the idealism of a guerilla TV, video art was to become McLuhan's handmaiden in a bid to brush away the dusty cobwebs of a museum tradition and reach into the living-rooms of the nation. Artists turned to video to document absences within dominant representation, to expose the mass media's mechanisms of manipulation and exploitation. In the 1990s however, the technology envisioned by video as a site of experimentation and difference has proved more adept at advancing the interests of a cultural industry than disrupting the institutionalized arenas of art and communication. Video art finds its aesthetic innovations appropriated and popularized by a rock video

format to create a perfect media formalism. Home video as a consumer toy, a public surveillance and consumer protection tool is the market byproduct of mass communication and a militarized satellite system. In a twist of irony, the very qualities of immediacy and accessibility that launched video's idealistic beginnings have become corporate rather than artistic assets.

Poised to replace Super-8 at a time when the static of the information revolution is increasing in volume to an interference of global proportions, Video-8 confronts this paradox of an electronic landscape: layers of transmission and mediation no longer decomposing and recomposing the body, but fragmenting it beyond human comprehension. Video-8's promise of cultural autonomy, of a participatory dialectic between aesthetic and social transformations, appear to echo that of Super-8's. The context for the two mediums,

however, has become quite distinct: Super-8 bounded by the history of art cinema on one hand and the home movie as the evocation of memory on the other, Video-8 entangled within territory of television in which a "one-way" flow of communication has had a profound effect on an oppositional blueprint to de-materialize and repoliticize modernism. As a writer who used to make Super-8 films and is now struggling to understand the implication of a world where technology has de-facto become ideology, I am not a soothsayer, I cannot predict a future for Video-8. I must insist, however, that it finds itself inside the same silence that envelops Super-8: an uneasy silence in which discourse fragments, boundaries shift, the social fabric that sustains a context for reception unravelling.

I do not think a diagnosis of this silence is readily forthcoming, although the lament for a loss of memory that permeates Vera

Frenkel's *The Last Screening Room: A Valentine* or the fusion of the body to a digital landscape in Max Almy's *Leaving The Twentieth Century* offer a vision more frightening than assuring of the future.⁸ It is for these reasons, perhaps, that I wish to preserve the memory of Super-8 as a site of technology where it was the artist rather than the engineer, the body rather than its simulated shadows, that defined the parameters of aesthetic vision. I do not believe we can escape the paradoxes of a post-industrial society. Super-8 as a raw material will probably become obsolete. In the face of its disappearance, however, I would hope that Video-8 takes up the legacy of Super-8, weaving from the layers of mediation that cloak consciousness, an art practice that is liberating rather than controlling, participatory rather than elite, that reveals not only the distances that now exist between the body and its representations but the vast

disparities, immense manipulations, and lies tumbling upon half-truths that technology now creates between the First and Third Worlds. ▼

The preceding text was given as a paper at a panel entitled *L'apport d'une technique légère, le Super-8, à l'art de cinéma*, at the *Vidéothèque de Paris* on January 18, 1990 in conjunction with a conference entitled, *Rencontres Internationales: Art Cinéma, Art Vidéo, Art Ordinateur*, organized by ASTARTI.

NOTES

1. Information on Specific films by John Porter can be found in The Funnel's distribution catalogue of 1984 and the 1986 supplement. Peter Rist's article "Super-8 Idealist" (*Vanguard*, Vol. 15, #2, April/May 1986) offers a valuable overview and analysis of Porter's work; while Martha Fleming's "Filming Buildings, Building Films" (*Parachute*, #25, Winter 1981) provides a description of *Scanning*, a film/performance work. Most recently, a solo retrospective of Porter's work sponsored by Pleasure Dome was held at the Euclid Theatre, Toronto, December 1, 1989.

2. As an active member of the Funnel, Canada's only centre for the production, exhibition and distribution of Super-8 and 16mm experimental film, John Porter helped organize "Open Screenings" until their closure by the Ontario Censor Board in 1982. In 1984, Porter initiated "Open Screenings" in defiance of the Ontario Censor Board at A-Space, a Toronto art gallery. These were held regularly until the summer of 1986. As well, Porter organized a "Tenth Anniversary Open Screening" at the Funnel, October 11, 1986. Porter's performance and installation piece, *Uncensored Movies*, a critique of the Ontario Censor Board's policies, was widely exhibited in 1985/86.

3. In addition to his extensive

photographic and print archives on the history of experimental film, John Porter has also published a series of articles including "Artists Discovering Film, Postwar Toronto," (*Vanguard*, Vol. 13, #5/6, Summer 1984), "Consolidating Film Activity," (*Vanguard*, Vol. 13, #9, November 1984) and "Toronto Film Art: 1976-86," *A Play of History*, Toronto: The Powerplant, May-June 1987). A number of Porter's portraits of film artists were published in *Spiral*, #9, October 1986, Pasadena, California.

4. From 1984-1986, A-Space Gallery, in Toronto sponsored two workshops for the production of Super-8 films exploring erotic film language. The second workshop, which Porter helped organize premiered the following films on September 3, 1986: *Eroticolours*, produced by Lesbian of Colour; *Out of the Blue: The Cosy Porn and Variety Slut Show*, produced by the Gwendolyn's in collaboration with Toronto strippers; *Gay Erotic Film Language*, produced by JAC, a collective of three homosexual artists, and *Erotic*, produced by the Bill Smith Ensemble jazz band. The first workshop included: *Slumber Party* by the Positive Pornographers, *The (S) Word-Swallowers* by Lynne Fernie, *This is a Story* by Lisa Steele, *An Apple a Day* by Gay Bell, and *Untitled: You Can't Take a Picutre Where There Ain't No Light*, by Kerri Kwinter.

5. Stated in an informal interview with the author.

6. Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki are Super-8 film and installation artists working in Paris, France. Documentation of their Atelier workshops held in 1982-83 and 1985-86 can be found in *Film Portraits of Women By Women*, a catalogue produced by the Funnel in April 1986 that surveyed work by women experimental filmmakers from France. In conjunction with this series at the Funnel, a project

for Toronto women was held to produce a third collective Super-8 film. Further information regarding Klonaris and Thomadaki's work can be found in *Technologies et Imaginaires*, a catalogue produced by A.S.T.A.R.I. for "Rencontres Internationales: Art Cinéma, Art Vidéo, Art Ordinateur."

7. Jean Baudrillard's early analyses of

the media can be read in his *A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, Mo.: Telos Press, 1981). His later elaborations upon the subject can be found in his *In The Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (New York, Semiotext, 1983) and *Simulations*, (New York: Semiotext, 1983).

8. Vera Frenkel is a Canadian multi-

media artist, based in Toronto, Ontario; and Max Almy is an American video artist, based in Oakland, California. Their respective video tapes, *The Last Screening Room: A Valentine* and *Leaving The Twentieth Century*, were screened in conjunction with the "Rencontres Internationales: Art Cinéma, Art Vidéo, Art Ordinateur."



John Porter
Soarin'
1981
2 min.
Photo:
the artist