

toronto's super8 festival

increasingly professional

by andrew dowler

This year's festival seemed to settle it; the S8 community is going professional. But differences of opinion and of experience persist, and the filmmakers at the Funnel are still the loyal opposition.



photo: Vivienne Kugler

Chairman of the Grants for Super 8 panel discussion, James Blue (centre) introduces panel members Gunther Hoos, Super 8 Sound, Massachusetts; Catherine Wyler, National Endowment for the Arts, USA; and Francoyse Picard, Canada Council, Ottawa

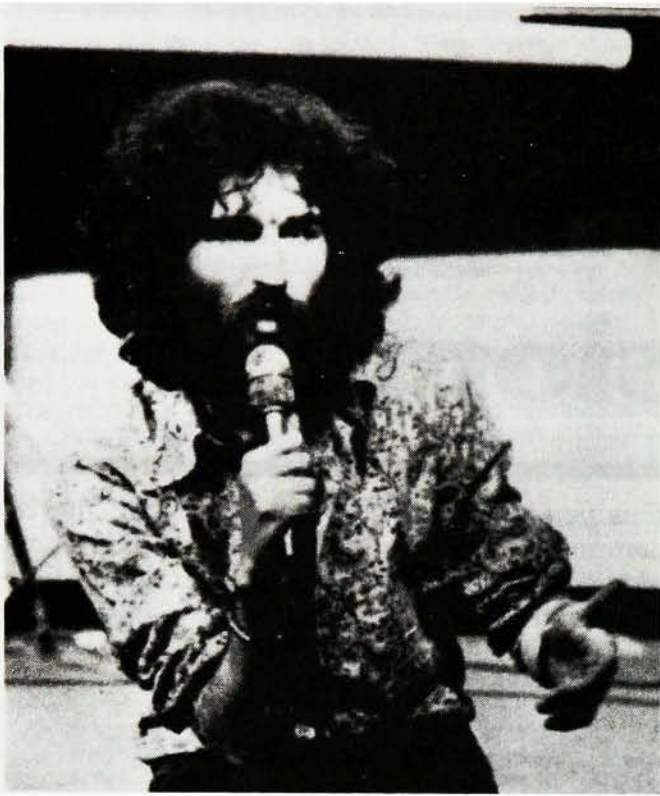
The fourth Toronto Super Eight Film Festival was held at Harbourfront from April 6th to 8th. In common with previous festivals, it featured screenings, craft workshops, glimpses of S8 activity from other countries and hordes of people talking shop and making contacts. Different from previous festivals, it featured prescreening of entries, cash and equipment prizes and seminars devoted to S8 as a money-making proposition. This is a reflection of the S8 community. Surprisingly, this professionalism was not universally lauded. We shall hear more of that later.

The centrepiece of this aspect of the festival was Saturday afternoon's panel discussion: Grants for S8 – Funding the Independent. James Blue, filmmaker, workshop giver and festival committee member, chaired the discussion and introduced

the panel members to a full house in Harbourfront's main hall. They were Eldon Garnett, a Toronto filmmaker who is thoroughly opposed to grants for S8; Francoyse Picard, head of the Canada Council's film program; Catherine Wyler, the assistant director for media of the American National Endowment for the Arts, and Gunther Hoos, S8 consultant to Cambridge.

Picard began by announcing that the Canada Council wants to fund S8 production and that she gets far fewer applications than she can handle. The crowd responded with a sudden hush and then the rustle and click of notebooks and tape recorders

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Independent, Parisian filmmaker Yves Roland: in France, Super 8 is a respectable and professional form of filmmaking

came into play. She went on to say that the Council has a maximum grant of \$40,000 per project and will fund everything from inception to release. It has a planning grant that covers from one to three months and allows the applicant to come back in the same year for production funds. It will fund blow-ups of films that have already found a non-commercial market, but it will not fund prints — except to save the decaying negatives of established artists (a job that Ms. Picard insisted properly belonged to the National Archives).

Although the Council does not currently engage in fund distribution, it may in the near future. Picard said she is currently looking into the applicability to Canada of a scheme that has worked well in the U.S. for the National Endowment for the Arts. In the past two years, Catherine Wyler has booked independent shorts into 3600 commercial theatres across the country. The response from public and theatre-owners has been so good that she is enlarging her operation and working to include features.

Questions came from the floor, mostly dealing with how to apply for grants and how the Council decides who to fund. Ms. Picard was happy to answer. She denied that the Council has a rating system and that it favors name artists over unknowns. Selection, she said, is made by a panel of artists working in the field. They examine applications and samples of the applicants' work, looking for evidence of talent and artistic growth. To the charge that this might, consciously or unconsciously, lead to favoritism, she replied that the Council changes its panels regularly and tries to vary them. She added that all panels are quick to spot and reject the inept budget — whether padded or starved. Sponsored films are also frowned on, as are films that already have a significant portion of the rights sold off.

For filmmakers wishing to jump to 16mm or to radically change their work, she recommended the Council's Explorations program. Although it is no part of her job or the Council's mandate, Picard said she put effort into finding appropriate backing for films she thought should be made, but that weren't Canada Council material.

Potential backers for S8 filmmakers were mentioned in some of the other workshops. In their talk on Applications of S8 to Research, Jake Pauls of the National Research Council and Ben Barkow, a Toronto behavioral psychologist, presented **The Stair Event**, a film sponsored by the National Research Council. Barkow and Pauls' purpose was to make a research film that would alert its intended audience of architects and planners to the practical considerations of safety when designing stairwells. To do this, they used multiple cameras in long shot and extreme close-up to catalogue the climbing patterns, accidents and near-accidents in major Canadian sports arenas. The result was a film that made its points in a clear, precise manner and, through its candid camera content, managed to be surprisingly entertaining.

Susanne Swibold and Elizabeth Garsonnin presented "Tracking Dinosaurs with S8" — the result of their contract with the Alberta Provincial Museum to document the fossil-and-footprint excavations of the Peace River Expedition. "Physiotherapy and S8" and "S8 in Education" suggested hospitals and boards of education, respectively, as sources of work.

Back at the panel discussion on funding, Gunther Hoos told the audience that the real money in S8 was found in transferring it to video, where the image is indistinguishable from that shot in any other format. He pointed to the success of Andrew Pearson's half-hour documentary, **Adrift in the World: Indochina Refugees**, made for the ABC network. Pearson did the film with a crew of two and a budget of \$10,000. While it can be criticized for being less a documentary look at life in a refugee camp and more an emotional appeal for Americans to support their former Vietnamese allies, the film is a thoroughly professional bit of work that looks very good on a television screen.

Further support for Gunther Hoos' view came from TRM Labs of Toronto who gave festival-goers guided tours of their video transfer facilities that include a version of "wet gate" printing to eliminate scratches and capacities for color correction, image enhancement and opticals. The TRM representative stressed that there was a lot of work in industrial films shot in S8 and transferred to video. Guided tours were also given by C.F.A. Labs. They specialize in blowing S8 up to 16mm and have the capacity to do it very fast and without any appreciable quality loss.

Gunther Hoos stressed the importance of achieving broadcast quality in the transfer, a goal requiring a good transfer done by a solid method. With transfer time at \$250 to \$350 an hour, leading to costs of up to \$1,300 for a half-hour film, the process requires good technical knowledge and self-discipline from the filmmaker. Most of the problems he's seen involve the lack of these qualities, especially in knowing the limits of the medium and the established standards of broadcast quality. He also mentioned problems with "defensiveness and ghetto mentality" in the S8 community.

Some festival-goers put a lot of effort into overcoming their technical ignorance. Not only was the trade show packed

throughout its run, but exhibitors reported, with vague traces of astonishment, that large numbers of people were asking very knowledgeable questions. Exhibitors included Bell & Howell, Adams and Associates, Octagon Cine Equipment, Magnetone Industries, Halmar Enterprises and Elmo. There was little that was new at this year's trade show, notable exceptions being the extreme wide angle, non-distorting lenses made by Century Precision and a Beaulieu projector with a reverse pressure-plate, an 11 to 30 zoom lens and 2400ft. reels. Older equipment that attracted a lot of interest included the Elmo GS800 stereo projector that allows for a 100 per cent, 70 per cent or 30 per cent mix of new to old sound, and the Elmo 612R and 1018R double system cameras.

People not upgrading their technical knowledge at the trade fair were doing it in the craft workshops, which were devoted to lighting, animation, Rotoscoping, Cinemascope and handholding. At one point in his workshop on sound recording, Douglas Berry of Sheridan College held up a microphone cable and said, "Most of your problems with location sound come from here." Someone interrupted with a can-we-fix-it-in-the-mix question, but few of the notetakers bothered to jot down the answer. They looked as if they already knew it.

Eldon Garnett sees the move toward funded S8 filmmaking as something to be shunned. His contribution to the panel discussion on funding was to warn the audience away from it. Attempting to get grants from an art bureaucracy could lead to a filmmaker abandoning the films he wants to make for the films he thinks they want to see. He had practical, personal complaints as well. He claimed that the Canada Council took his work with his application and sat on it for three months. This, he said, deprived him of opportunities for exhibition and any money that it might bring in. Picard replied that things didn't usually take that long and that the Council could look at his work and have it back to him in a week or two. Mr. Garnett greeted this dubiously and opined that it didn't matter anyway, since the Council stood no chance of appreciating his particular artistic vision, which involves shaky camera, scratches and what he describes as "truly *bad* films." He said he's given up on grants and now funds his productions by saving up a couple of hundred dollars and then goes out to shoot. He loses money, but it's a price he's willing to pay. He urged the audience to pay for keeping S8 filmmaking wholly independent.

This might, just possibly, be the "ghetto mentality" mentioned by Gunther Hoos. If it is, then Eldon Garnett is not alone.

After the funding discussion, Francoyse Picard took James Blue, Ed Hugetz, director of the Southwestern Alternate Media Project, who gave a seminar on the community uses of S8 and some others to visit the Funnel. The Funnel is an art and experimental film theatre and loose equipment co-op funded by the Canada Council. Work by Funnel members was noticeably absent from the festival.

One of the Funnel members present was Ross McLaren who founded and ran the first Toronto S8 Festival, four years ago. After the introductions, James Blue asked for a screening. When it was over, James Blue and Ed Hugetz were ecstatic. The work was wonderful and the energy and atmosphere of the Funnel were like the early days of the Godard, Truffaut and Bazin group. James Blue immediately began to set up deals for showing the Funnel work on his sixteen-week, PBS,

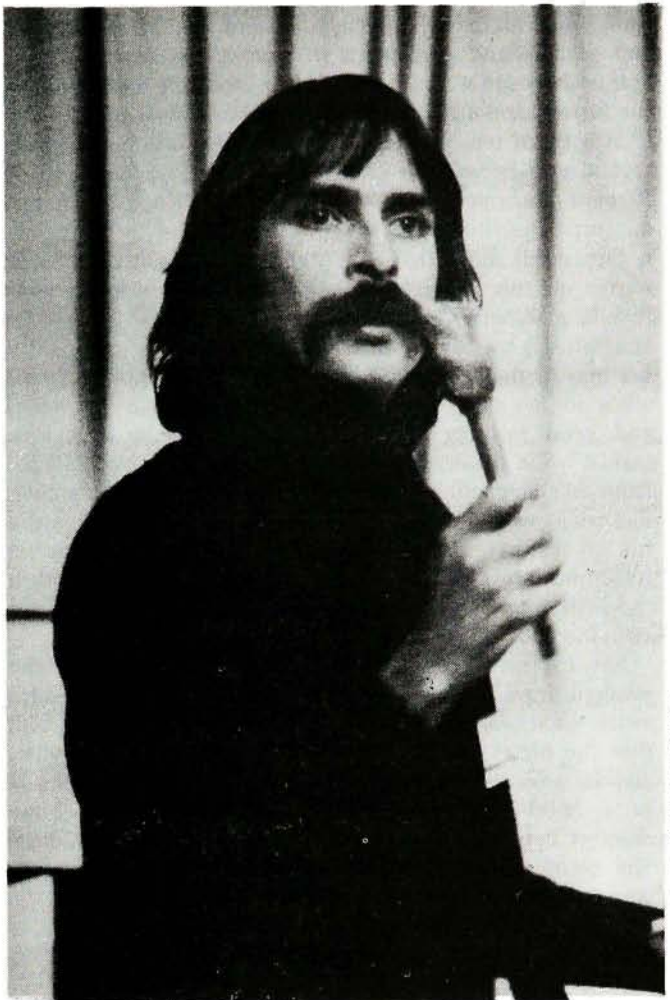


photo: Vivienne Kugler

Venezuelian Super 8 feature filmmaker Julio Neri: in South America, Super 8 is not a hobby but a political weapon

S8 showcase series. He offered \$5.00 per minute of screen time. Funnel members responded eagerly.

Then somebody asked why this amazing work wasn't in the festival.

The chill descended. Individually and collectively, the Funnel members were not happy about the festival. There were vague, dark mutterings that Richard and Sheila Hill had somehow pirated the festival away from Ross McLaren. Someone said that the festival had been set up for artists working in S8 and pointed to the fewer number of art films in this year's festival as proof that the judges "don't understand and would rather see something in focus." The trade fair, the prescreening and the prizes all added up to a commercial sellout and a competitive spirit that had nothing to do with art.

James Blue, a veteran of sixties radicalism, pointed out that the festival was shaped by those who entered it and suggested that next year the Funnel group do a little lobbying for their kind of festival. He mentioned the thin edge of the wedge. The Funnel members did not respond eagerly and the discussion of James Blue's TV series was resumed.

Sheila Hill was this year's, and last year's, festival director. She is the woman against whom much of this criticism was directed. A short recital of the grievances from the Funnel wiped out the lethargy induced by two days of festival management and replaced it with fury. She said she has nothing to say a-

gainst Ross McLaren, but she's sick and tired of back-stabbing and second-hand complaints. If anyone has anything to say against her, she wants it said to her face. She denied pirating the festival and claimed that Ross McLaren walked away from it in a fit of temper. Her husband, Richard, directed it in its second year because he thought it too good an idea to let die. Richard confirmed this. Of the reasons for Ross McLaren's fit of temper, he would only say, "I can't imagine."

Sheila Hill added that Ross McLaren was on last year's committee and this year was invited to organizational meetings and to give a seminar. She said he never showed at the meetings and refused to teach without payment. Nobody was paid for teaching at the festival. Sheila Hill said that the budget would allow for no more than travel expenses and that she, herself, had been working for months for "less than a secretary makes." She described a few of the things she accomplished from her impossibly tiny, cluttered office. They included dickering with a hostile Philippine government for a passport for S8 feature-maker Domingo Arong and bringing the festival in on budget. But she'd had enough. Too much work for too little money. If she can't get a decent raise next year, she said, the director's job is open to anyone who wants it.

She explained that the prescreening that upset the Funnel resulted from 250 entries, 100 more than last year and far more than could be screened during the festival. She added that the prizes were there to attract more and better entries and to give reward to merit. She pointed out that the top prize, \$500 from Carling-O'Keefe Breweries, went to Funnel member Patrick Jenkins for his art/experimental film, **Fluster**. She didn't see him returning his prize, though he was welcome to, if he wanted.

She has a point. However, there is something in the manner of **Fluster's** winning...

Yana Sterbak, formerly of the Gallery Optica in Montreal and a judge at this year's festival, explained that the entries were divided into categories: Art/Experimental, Fiction/Narrative and Fact/Documentary. The six judges were paired into three categories. They did the prescreening and presented their award candidates to the other judges for argument and vote. Prizes were distributed according to the judges' best guess at who needed what. Ms. Sterbak's favorite film was **Fluster**. Nobody else thought it worth a prize. She won them over with a "brilliant half-hour speech" in its defence, but now she's left with thoughts of what would have happened with an inarticulate judge and with a confirmation of her belief that people aren't open enough to experimental films. Like Sheila Hill, she thought that the shortage of art/experimental entries from all over the world could be explained partially by the fact that such works are among the first things to die when depressions set in.

Fluster is a six-minute, black-and-white film that uses a single light attached to a rushing, swirling camera to explore the upper storey of a deserted house. These sequences are intercut with shots of something in a corner that is made of cloth. It falls and falls and never lands. On first viewing the effect is upsetting and, somehow, reminiscent of grim, local family homicides.

Jim Piper's **Terminal** and **Rattlesnake Roundup**, by Charles Glen Daniels, each received \$500 from the festival. **Terminal** is a drama about the struggles of a totally downtrodden and naive housewife to enroll in and succeed at a university art course. Its popularity with the audience seems to rest largely on its subject matter. **Rattlesnake Roundup** depicts a putting-rattlesnakes-in-a-bag contest held in Texas. It features great sequences of calmness in the face of snakebite and confrontation between those who think the roundup is ecologically harmful and those who don't. It is an excellent example of unobtrusive filming in confined spaces.

Other prizes went to: **Equivocation**, which received an Elmo two-track projector; **Graffitus**, a Bell & Howell sound camera; **Halfway to Heaven**, a Magnetone striping machine. **Halfway to Heaven** is a skydiving film by Alex Hessel of Toronto with members of his skydiving club. It is not a polished film, but the sequences of dusk jumping are beautiful and sinister. Some sharp-eyed distributor should have a look at this one.

A \$100 gift certificate from Halmar Enterprises went to **Lensound** by Robert Attanasio. Five \$100 gift certificates from Magnetone Industries went to **One Room Battle Ground**, **Brain's General History**, **One Hour, Twenty Minutes**, **Bar Rock** and **Delay**. The Jury Chairman's Award of a Kodak sound projector went to **Azrael** by Andrew Doucette.

These and the other films screened provided the full range of S8 work, from personal diary films through exercises in preparation for 16mm and 35mm to fully realized professional work. The range of subjects, imagination and polish prove once again that S8 is somewhat better than "alive and well."

Will Sheila Hill resign as director? Will the Funnel group work for their kind of festival? Tune in next year. In a way, it doesn't matter; the festival will almost surely survive. But Sheila Hill does a good job. She deserves her raise. And the festival group could keep the festival balanced. A balanced festival is the microcosm that reflects the macrocosm is becoming more important every year. □

