



ON SATURATION AND GRAIN — LIFE AS A “WESTSIDER”...

USING MULTIPLE
FILM STOCKS IN
A SHORT FILM

by Charles
Doran

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here are more stocks of Super-8 film out than ever before. Unfortunately, aside from the demo DVDs of one or two Super-8 labs, there is literally no way for the average consumer to sample these stocks.

The short film, “Westsider” may change all that. A subversive, black comedy, “Westsider” tells the story of a cocky and ambitious Los Angeles-residing twenty-something architect. “Westsider” is the name of the film as well as the title character, a recent architectural-school grad who becomes obsessed with the idea that the only parts of the city worth living and working in are the parts he arrogantly terms “the Westside of life” — Malibu, Santa Monica, Beverly Hills, Venice, etc.

In planning this, I thought about directors like Steven Soderbergh who experimented with changing the “look” of their filmstock to reflect the “look” of the film’s locale (“Traffic”). It seemed to me that my elitist character would see his twisted version of “the

Westside” in beautiful, very saturated colors. The obvious choice, of course, was Kodachrome 40. Unfortunately, Kodak had announced their intention to discontinue the stock over a year ago. I had stashed away about half a dozen carts but knew this wouldn’t be enough. Luckily, by the time I was about ready to shoot, a new stock became available for Super-8 — Fuji’s Velvia, rated at 50 ASA. Currently this stock is available through Spectra Film and Video in North Hollywood, CA (www.spectrafilmandvideo.com) and GK-Film in Germany (<http://www.englisch.film-super8.de/>).

This super-saturated film stock has colors that are amazing and carries almost no grain whatsoever. I shed no tears when the last of my K40 ran out. In my opinion the Velvia is far better.

As writer-director of “Westsider,” I utilized the Velvia for use in all the “Westside” exteriors — architectural shots, scenes of the protagonist jogging down the boulevard or strolling up the street, admiring the beauty of his paradise (not to mention

his beautiful Asian-American girlfriend). Everything related to this almost-surreal-looking stock has an upbeat narration going along with it — the character’s voiceover relates how wonderful he feels about his life, his job, and his future.

The character’s fortune changes once he contemptuously decides to tell his architectural firm bosses where he is willing to work — only at job sites on the “Westside” of Los Angeles. Not surprisingly, his employment is immediately terminated, thus beginning his downward spiral.

To illustrate the psychological nuances going on in the lead character’s mind, I decided on a subtle film stock change — Kodak’s newly-introduced 64T Ektachrome. This film came out as a replacement to Kodachrome 40 and has been loudly derided by K40 purists as a second- or third-rate alternative. For my purposes I found it to be more than adequate. With proper exposure and color correction in telecine sessions we were able to make it look good — not as rich as the Velvia or K40 — but perfect to illustrate the beginning of the end for my protagonist.

The scenes shot with this stock showed the “Westsider” forced to sell his beloved Volvo, stare at an eviction notice on his apartment door, and gaze reluctantly from Mulholland Drive to his new, dreaded destination — the San Fernando Valley.

For those not familiar with Los Angeles, the San Fernando Valley (aka “the Valley”) is the first place someone who values the Westside as much as the title character does wouldn’t want to reside in. Someone asked me recently if I thought people from other cities would be able to relate, and I explained it’s like this all over. For example, most Manhattanites would rather stay in debt than move to Brooklyn, or worse, New Jersey.

Prior to World War II, the San Fernando Valley was a part of Los Angeles that consisted mainly of orange groves and pristine farmland. Post-World War II housing shortages

and poor urban planning led to horrible over-development — most of the farms have been turned into tract homes and ugly stucco apartments. All of the orange groves have been plowed over into cement monstrosities. It's a horribly depressing area that I myself spent a few uneventful years in when I was in my twenties (the film has some semi-autobiographical moments).

a year. I had stashed away about eight rolls in the fridge and, ironically enough, was able to purchase several carts at the same place I bought the Velvia — Spectra Film and Video in North Hollywood. I was never a big fan of this film stock, certainly not for outdoor filming. With its hideous, washed-out, grainy look, I found that with some subtle green-yellow color-shifting by Spectra's colorist (in the RANK transfer) I was able to

abandoned train tracks, a street lined with pawn shops, low-grade thrift stores, blood banks, etc. These aesthetically displeasing locales were scouted out by myself and the DP in advance. Shooting "guerilla" style, we were able to jump in and out of these locales without permits.

Unfortunately, we had such a good time burning through the 7240 that we eventually ran out before



Clockwise from top left: Vision2 200T negative; Fuji Velvia 64T; Kodachrome 40; Fuji Velvia 50D (from Spectra Film & Video). Pictured on this and the previous page are actor Will Lupardus and actress Nikki McKenzie.

And with this background/history lesson, we are introduced to our third, and in some ways most important film stock, one that is the perfect "antagonist" to the Velvia and K40, Kodak's discontinued Ektachrome 7240 VNF (Video News Film). The 7240 stock, championed by few (notably "Sleep Always" directors Rick Palidwor and Mitch Perkins, who are among the few to make this stock look decent), had been discontinued by Kodak for over
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create an ugly, unsettling look for the protagonist's downward spiral. All the scenes shot with this stock were Valley exterior shots, and I found the results stunningly bad, in a good way.

The 7240's color shift and grain echoed our protagonist's internal vision of the hell. For three days we filmed our actor wandering around some of the worst areas of the Valley — a field filled with electric towers,

the shoot ended. As this stock was discontinued, we were at a loss. Kodak's 64T came to the rescue. Since the grain is fairly large for this slow speed stock, Spectra's colorist, Doug Thomas, was able to manipulate and tweak it to match the 7240. I was doubtful that this would work but it did! The 64T is versatile in this way — when I temporarily ran out of the Velvia while shooting outside architect Frank Gehry's Westside home (another "guerilla" shooting

day), we had no choice but to use the 64T. Again, Thomas was able to adjust the footage to make it look as vibrant and as saturated as possible.

Other stocks used in the making of this film included Kodak's Vision 200T for all the interiors, Westside as well as Valley. I had used K40 for an all-interior shoot a few years ago and my lighting man swore he'd kill me if I ever tried that again.

To differentiate between "Valley" and "Westside" looks, I had Thomas use his "Soylent Green" filter on all the Valley interiors to maintain the feeling of misery.

A 21-year-old roll of Kodak's long-discontinued Ektachrome 160G was included with a Canon 814 AZ I purchased off of eBay. Since it wasn't opened, I decided to try it out on some Valley street footage (right in front of Spectra). Surprisingly enough, much of the stock's ugly colors came through, and several seconds of a bum walking in front of the shop will be included in the film. As predicted from this stock, little tweaking in post was needed to keep it looking bad!

I had heard of a third party vendor who was selling Kodak's 100D Ektachrome for Super-8. Intrigued, I bought a roll for use in more Westside outdoor footage and was pleased with the results. While not as saturated as the Velvia, the 100D — if Kodak decides to definitely release it — is far superior to the 64T. Even better, was a test cartridge of Fuji's 64T I was able to purchase at Spectra (don't bother them — they only had three rolls to begin with and they are all gone!). Unlike the Kodak version, the Fuji stock had much tighter grain and vibrant colors. Unfortunately, I was only able to shoot this on an overcast weekend, so I probably did not see it at its peak. Despite this, the stock managed to impress me with its vibrant colors of foliage I shot in Santa Monica.

Kodak's 500T stock was used exclusively for nighttime exteriors. I used it once on an apartment balcony in Marina del Rey, locked down

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and aimed at a busy, well-lit street for some time lapse shots from a borrowed 1014-XLS. Another evening was spent shooting with the camera hooked up to an auto window-mount, filming various restaurant and club store fronts. By keeping the camera's aperture wide open, I was able to obtain fine results from this incredibly versatile stock.

Will the results of this 9-stock experiment succeed in giving the viewers of "Westsider" the psychological effect intended? Hopefully, the answer will be "yes". ■

For more examples of the film stocks used, please visit www.westsiderfilm.com.

Charles Doran is a graphic designer/filmmaker living in Los Angeles. His previous film, "Ennui" screened at festivals in the U.S., Canada and Europe and was the winner of best short film at the Boston Underground Film Festival in 2005.

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