

From the Small Screen to the Big Screen: The Super8's Distribution of *Sandokan* TV Series

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'From the small screen to the big screen' proclaims the advertising text of the Super8's of a television series distributed in 1979 by the German company Piccolo Film, emphasizing the novelty and the potential of format. The film is *Sandokan*, an Italian miniseries from 1976 directed by Sergio Sollima and starring the Indian actor Kabir Bedi as the exotic protagonist of Salgari's famous adventure. This contribution maps the European and global success of the series and its media format's history, focusing in particular on Super8's distribution. It retraces Super8 'reduction prints' in different languages by relying on film catalogues from the seventies and on sources gathered from platforms such as Imdb and Ebay (where collectors trade Super8) and interviews to ex-employees and owners of former Super8's distribution companies in Italy and Germany. The paper considers the geographical circulation of *Sandokan*'s Super8 editions to investigate *Sandokan*'s figure beyond its literary origins. Super8's history shows an unexplored relation between media broadcasting and past practices of home viewing beyond the theatrical realm. *Sandokan*'s Super8 circulation can be regarded as part of larger phenomenon of consumer culture, where reduction prints become a synecdoche to a larger cultural myth.

INTRODUCTION

'Super8 makes it possible: from the small TV screen to the big film screen,' proclaims the advertising line for the newest Super8 version of the Italian TV series *Sandokan* (Sergio Sollima, 1976). Co-produced by the Italian television RAI and the production company Titanus, in collaboration with the German Bavaria Film and the French ORTF, the series was released on Super8 in Italy in 1976 and in Germany in 1979 coinciding with its television debut in the country. This short ad epitomizes one of the main features of the Super8 format and for the circulation of 'reduction prints'¹ versions, or 'abridged versions (Ward 2016),

¹ Alexandra Schneider describes reduction prints as 'small gauge versions of films marketed over decades in the 20th century for domestic and nontheatrical exhibition. "Reduction" here can refer to both the film's gauge and duration, with reduction prints often shortening full-length feature films to the essential 3 to 20 minutes[...]' (Schneider

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thus its ability to overcome the limits of TV by watching a movie directly at home, whenever you want, and on the 'cinema' big screen.

Similar to family films, reduction prints were not a specific innovation of Super8 format, the practice of selling films to be watched at home started already with the first small gauges such as the Pathè Baby and its library in the first half of the twentieth century (Santi and Van der Heijden 2022; Schneider 2007). The ad also points out a movement: from the small screen to the big screen. A new need, different to those of the 1920s and 1930s, directed to TV viewers and the TV screen: a desire for a cinema 'experience' on a big screen at home, an experience which Super8 finally made possible to a larger audience. In this contribution I retrace, from several online and historical material sources, the genesis of this cult TV series and rethink it in terms of a larger film configuration. First, I explore the legacy of the TV series and its significance in relation to other adaptations and its format of distribution, in particular to the Super8 film circulation in Italy and Germany.

The distribution of *Sandokan* on Super8 and its linked success as a media franchising can represent an early example of cinema's transformative essence, of its mobility beyond the movie theatre. Although film theory long based its object of study on the triad 'canon+index+apparatus', as Vinzenz Hediger and Miriam De Rosa have argued: "cinema is an unspecific medium of constantly changing and often transitory configurations" (De Rosa and Hediger 2016, 14). *Sandokan* testifies to the power of the moving image to produce a cultural myth beyond cinema, satisfying shifting spectatorship's needs at the end of the seventies. I explore some digitized Super8 material (two abridged version of *Sandokan* distributed in Germany and Italy) and paratextual media relative to the TV series in order to map the Super8 distribution and reconstruct their reduction. These abridged versions, I argue, functioned as a synecdoche for a broader cultural myth.

RECONFIGURING THE MYTH: FROM THE BIG SCREEN TO THE SMALL SCREEN

Before Sollima's TV series, there had been several adaptations of Sandokan's story for the big screen. As Anton Giulio Mancino in an article writes, these films were produced in specific timeframes over the course of more than seventy years (Mancino 2011, 188). A story thus, that keeps coming back.

The figure of Sandokan comes from the fantasy of Emilio Salgari, an Italian novelist who worked at the end of the 19th through the beginning of the 20th century dying a tragic death. The story, which would later become a famous TV series, was inspired by the novel *Le tigri di Mompracem* (The Tigers of Mompracem).²

2019, 129).

² The story in *Le Tigri di Mompracem* narrates the story of a pirate prince

Mompracem is a fantasy island in Malaysia and Sandokan is a prince-turned-pirate after the British colonizers took his father's land and throne by force. In the story Sandokan seeks revenge for his freedom but also for love. He falls in love with Marianna, the Italo-British daughter of the representative in Malaysia of East India Company. Only in 1941 two films, *I Pirati della Malesia* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1941) and *Le due Tigri* (Giorgio Simonelli, 1941), were released. Again, in the fifties, further six movies based on Salgaris' novels were made. The sixties witnessed the most lasting phase: nine movies were produced, of which the trilogy directed by Umberto Lenzi with *Sandokan, la tigre di Mompracem* (1963), *I Pirati della Malesia* (1964) and *La Montagna di luce* (1965). This latter period coincides with a generalized increasing production of Italian films (Westerns in particular) and a steady decline in movie theater attendance.

The figure of Sandokan in 1963 was associated with the actor Steve Reeves, protagonist of the movie *Sandokan, la tigre di Mompracem* (Umberto Lenzi, 1963). The director casts the American actor, who was a body builder and an actor of *peplum* films (sword and sandals movies). In particular, he became known as the protagonist of the financial success *Le fatiche di Ercole* (Pietro Francisci, 1958). The film by Lenzi, the production of which, following the RPOCA (Registro Pubblico delle Opere Cinematografiche e Audiovisive - "Public Register for Cinematographic and Audiovisual Works"), started in May 1963, adapted Salgari's novel and set the movie in Ceylon, in southern India. The film was announced in August 1963 on *Araldo dello Spettacolo* and was released to theaters at the end of 1963.

In this movie, Reeves, an American ex-Mr. Universe, was not exactly the picture of an Indonesian pirate king, nevertheless, his interpretation became successful enough to justify the production of further films with the same cast. The film, though, did not have a political character if compared to that of Sollima's later adaptation. However, this historical-mythological genre remained profitable for around a decade until Spaghetti Westerns overtook its popularity. As Brunetta (2003) writes, the success of *Per un pugno di dollari* (Sergio Leone, 1964) will have as a consequence the transfer of producers and directors from *peplum* to Western. Between 1962 and 1979, 498 Westerns were released in Italy: the

who takes revenge against the British to conquer back his land, or better, his island. Mompracem is not a real island but some scholars argue that it must refer to what is today the island of Keraman in Borneo. Some ancient maps, on which probably Salgari relied, did mention this island as Mompracem (see Gerlich 1998; Raiola 1975). Salgari, although he never travelled to Malaysia, based his research upon historical and contemporary sources. One of the sources was for instance the *Giornale Illustrato dei Viaggi*, a periodical which featured illustrated adventures and travel accounts in the nineteenth century. As Francesca Orsini, a literary scholar, notes, those sources were 'predominantly orientalist and racist.' Nevertheless, as also noted by Orsini, although Salgari's major sources were racist and outdated and his Salgari's figure contributed to circulate many of orientalist's bias about India and Southeast Asia, it made them familiar to his readers. In Latin America Sandokan's reception was read primarily as anti-colonial and this helped his anti-imperialist fame to grow. The development of the TV series by Sollima follows this anti-imperialist reputation.

wave started in 1964 (with 32 films) and reached its peak in 1968 with 73 films³. Overall, between 1964 and 1976 Italian film production remains high and steady. This same period saw an increase in co-productions for Italian films (Corsi 2001); moreover, television's owners are progressively growing. 1976 will be the year of the Constitutional Court's ruling allowing private TV stations to broadcast, this will determine the end of the monopoly of public broadcast and set a historical turning point for Italian film production.

Before starting the production of *Sandokan* Sergio Sollima was already a successful director. He started directing spy-thrillers in the sixties and achieved success with his Western film *La Resa dei Conti* in 1966, followed by *Faccia a faccia* (1967) and *Corri uomo corri* (1968). Differently from other directors before, Sollima reconfigures the story of Sandokan by thinking about this figure not just as a musculus hero but rather someone like Toshiro Mifune, the hero of Akira Kurosawa's *Yōjinbō* (1961), film which inspired (or better that was copied by) Sergio Leone for *Per un pugno di dollari*⁴.

Sollima, who had joined the partisan resistance during WWII, was very conscious of Sandokan's potential as a figure with political significance. As historian Aliza Wong (2016, 68) highlights: "Sollima chose to adapt Salgari's novels and the character of the pirate Sandokan to bring to the forefront the political themes he had already introduced in his Marxist Spaghetti Westerns." For the production of *Sandokan* Sollima spent months in Borneo and Malaysia looking for a multilingual cast. He collaborated with researchers and travels to find the "actual" Mompracem in Borneo and films there for seven months (Raiola 1975). He works on *Sandokan* in a historical moment of upheaval where preoccupations about capitalism, globalization, and the growing divide between the privileged and the poor are mirrored in the story by the struggle of Sandokan against the imperialist power of the East India Company. For Sollima, Sandokan is the paladin of the fight against injustice and oppression⁵. However, this may not be the reason why this adaptation was so successful, and why its success overcame generations.

Instead, a combination of factors did influence this cultural phenomenon. *Sandokan* by Sollima was broadcast in January 1976, thus between 1975 and

3 This is reported in (Fisher 2014, 224). Moreover, Manzoli says that Jean-Francois Giré reports that between 1964 and 1975 around 520 Western films were produced in Europe see (Manzoli 2012a, p. 128).

4 More interestingly Steve Reeves, as he declared, was originally asked by Leone to be the protagonist of his film but he refused (Lane 2000).

5 Testifying to Sollima's stance there is a famous dialogue in the TV series between Marianna and his father where she asks him if what he calls a civilizing mission is nothing else than an excuse to colonize, deplete, and exploit at its own benefit. Marianna cannot even dare to an interest into politics (she is a woman and the whole question is who she is getting married to) and accuse the colonizer's 'mission' because this is of course the political rationale of all the imperialistic efforts of the British. Marianna rebels and escapes with Sandokan to Mompracem where they start a new community, being open to everyone who shares their values of plurality and tolerance. The interracial relationship between Marianna and Sandokan is central for the development of Sandokan's own identity.

1977, when the SIAE recorded the highest drop in theatrical attendance in cinemas. This corresponded to a rise of television devices still within a legal monopoly of public broadcast RAI that would show the series. This combination allowed the series to be seen by more than 27 million viewers and thus achieved unprecedented popularity pretty quickly. To this, we may add the choice of Kabir Bedi as the protagonist, compared to Steeve Reeves: not a white and muscular actor of *peplum*, but an authentic non-Western, a very slim and tall Indian, that although not convincing critics at first⁶ will quickly conquer an army of fans across all Europe (Manzoli 2012a). The series will be appreciated also for its exotic but authentic authentic character. The famous fight with the tiger is in the version by Lenzi not only unrealistic, but absurd and ridiculous if compared to the later known and spectacular scene between Kabir Bedi and the tiger. The new *Sandokan* series will also benefit from the care that Sollima had taken in the development of the opening credits of the film (as he before did for his Western movies). *Sandokan* starts with an engaging intro sequence with a modern soundtrack played by Oliver Onions, who had before composed music score for Spaghetti Western. Indeed, the soundtrack will be as successful becoming one of the most sold singles in Italy.

The TV series would also take advantage from a wider European distribution. It was produced by Titanus⁷ on behalf of RAI, the Italian public broadcaster, as a co-production between RAI, Bavaria Film in Germany and France's ORTF⁸. Although the crew was Italian, the cast was multilingual and Sollima chose to adopt a rather realistic approach by filming on the ground in the location of Pulau Kapas in Malaysia and partly in India. In the introduction of the book by Sergio Raiola (1975), Sollima himself explained some of the details of his previous exploration in Malaysia and how they had selected those locations.

The TV co-production is one of other European broadcast efforts, such as *Odissea* (Franco Rossi, 1968), to create together an internationally successful TV series. The film was announced already in November 1973 (*Araldo Dello Spettacolo* 1973) and its production starts at the end of September 1974⁹. As Giacomo Manzoli writes, in August 1975 Titanus refused to hand over the completed film reels demanding an additional amount from RAI, given the increased production costs (2012a, 221). RAI, as public broadcast, refuses and wins the contention and forces Titanus to deliver the reels by December. *Sandokan* aired in Italy in 1976 on the 6th of January on prime time on the second channel in black and white, despite it having been shot in color and planned to be broadcast as such.

6 Manzoli remembers how Mario Soldati negatively responded on *Il Mondo* to the film and the choice of Kabir Bedi as protagonist (2012a, 219).

7 Francesco Di Chiara has written extensively about the history of Titanus as one of the long-lived Italian production companies, in particular about the time period 1949-1954 (Di Chiara 2013).

8 I could not consult the production documents, but some sources such as Imdb Pro do cite as one of the coproducers also the British broadcast ITC.

9 As reported in RPOCA (Registro Pubblico delle Opere Cinematografiche e Audiovisive).

For six weeks every Monday a new episode airs. Its success was enormous, it brings instant fame to its protagonist Kabir Bedi. The series will be released the same year in Spain, France, Holland, and other locations within and outside of Europe, its reception was especially great in Latino America, where Salgari's novels were already quite famous.

Due to its unprecedented popularity and to the fact that the series had been broadcast only in black and white, the series was distributed theatrically in two parts. The first release was in May 1976. The film grossed in the first week around 200 million, and other 90 million in the second week (*Cinespettacolo* 1976), not a huge success; as a comparison, *Three Days of the Condor* (Sidney Pollack, 1975), produced by Titanus as well, made almost 2 billion at box office. Just shortly after the broadcasting of the series, a new film based on another Salgari's novel was announced, produced by Cineriz: *Il Corsaro nero* (Sergio Sollima, 1976). Moreover, in the following year, another production about Sandokan, a sequel only for theatrical distribution, would start, produced again by Cineriz. RPOCA documents trace the beginning of the shootings of *La tigre è ancora viva: Sandokan alla Riscossa* on 16 May 1976. The film will be released in cinemas in December 1977. The story recasts Bedi as Sandokan, Philippe Leroy as Yanez and Adolfo Celi as Lord Brooke. It would not be a major success at the box office and would not be distributed as much as the series. This second movie will repeat though the successful myth of *Sandokan* as a paladine against oppression - as Alberto Crespi (2018) writes - "a leader who makes you think about Vietnam, Cuba and to Resistance".

What Sollima succeeds in, is restoring in the most popular adventure character of Sandokan his revolutionary thrusts that brought to his Westerns a critical third-worldism. The success of the series *Sandokan* by Sergio Sollima will let it be distributed globally. with RAI selling it to 85 countries.¹⁰ The last translation was made in 2015 by the titular character actor's company, Bedi Media, for a DVD box in Hindi. It will never air in England though, and the reason is perhaps its strong position against the British. Nevertheless, an English version will circulate on Super8.

RETRACING *SANDOKAN'S* SUPER8 DISTRIBUTION: SUPER8'S ABRIDGED VERSIONS

The distribution of *Sandokan* on Super8 outlines a different story from the film history on theatrical distribution. It is a part of film history that is still largely untold. Scholars have explored the history of small gauge cinema and home

¹⁰ IMDB lists a series of translations of the title of Sandokan in almost 20 different languages. See (*Sandokan (Miniserie 1976) - Informationen zur Veröffentlichung - IMDb*, n.d.)

Distributors of Super8 copies of Sandokan



Fig. 1.
A map of the Super8 versions found and the distribution companies.
Graphic by the author.

movies more extensively (Schneider 2004; Santi and Fiorini 2005; Simoni 2005; Cati 2009; Streible, Roepke, and Mebold 2007; Simoni, Edmonds, and Fiorini 2007; Acland and Wasson 2011; Santi and Van der Heijden 2022) but the particular history of Super8 and reduction prints has yet to be fully explored (Goergen 2002; Forster and Goergen 2007; Schneider 2019).

Through a Super8 film collector in Germany, I was personally made aware that a Super8 copy of *Sandokan* had been distributed in 1979 by the company Piccolo Film. Piccolo Film, a company from Munich, was one of the biggest distributors in the seventies and early eighties in Germany. Their catalog distributed many comedies and animations,¹¹ for instance by Disney, and manufactured copies first on 8mm and later on Super8 for home entertainment. Relying on film catalogs, which I acquired through the collector Andreas Chmielewski in Germany, and researching some online sources on eBay, where Super8 collectors are selling their films, it is possible to retrace some of the Super8 versions circulating in Europe and across the world at the end of the seventies and early eighties. Following two examples, I reconstruct the way the original TV release was 'reduced' for this specific format.

¹¹ They were holding the rights of Disney and therefore distributing most of their animations and films. Many of this info were collected in our project in an interview of a former employee of Piccolo Film, Michael Teubig in September 2022. We also gathered information from collectors Andreas Chmielewski and Joachim Schmidt who is also curator of the website Off2.de, which collects many information about the history of Super8 reduction prints's culture in Germany.

The rights of the series *Sandokan* were held by SACIS, the company which belonged to RAI and was responsible for the distribution of their rights across the world. In Italy, the company I.E.-international, based in Milan, distributed different Super8 versions not only on a national level but also in other countries. The company was founded by Renato Cepparo and his son Roberto¹². They distributed and produced different abridged and full versions, mostly in Italian and English. Some of these copies, in English, Italian, and Serbo-Croatian, destined to the Yugoslavian area are still being sold by collectors via Ebay or other platforms.

Another Italian company called Mupi¹³ from Florence, was distributing internationally also copies of *Sandokan*. These had been distributed in many different versions, all abridged. The company, which mostly produced toys and some entertainment systems for children was circulating Super8 versions of *Sandokan* which were extremely reduced. As Stefano Bertani explains on a website dedicated to this historical company ("Mupigames.Com | Toys to Games – Un Brand Che Ha Fatto La Storia," n.d.; Bertani 2022) Mupi produced a series of different versions which would fit to one or more of their entertainment systems. They were the first to introduce optical toys. They were selling, for instance, the so-called Cinevisor, which was a small TV device that people operated by a crank which, thanks to an internal light and a system of mirrors, could project the film onto the small screen. They also had different projectors, sometimes in the form of a movie camera, which would project the images directly on the surface. These Super8 versions were extremely short and would last less than a minute and were about 8 meters long. These Super8 films were contained by a cartridge which enabled them to work on the Cinevisor or the other projectors. Mupi distributed for instance *Sandokan* in six different extracts. All without sound, and thus distributed also for a larger international audience as it is clear by the still circulating material [Fig. 2] where titles of each episode are translated also in German, French, Spanish and English.

The titles of the six extracts are: *I tigrotti all'arrembaggio*, *Caccia alla tigre*, *L'agguato di Yanez*, *Sandokan alla riscossa*, *L'assalto a Mompracem*, *Verso nuove battaglie* (see Fig. 2 for the translations). These episodes feature mostly action sequences, sometimes we see muted dialogues, but these are probably chosen to introduce a character or a specific relationship between two characters, like the romance between Sandokan and Marianna. The six copies have a length of ca. 2 minutes and thirty seconds and cover the whole story as seen in the series, showing the major turning points such as battles and duels.

Bertani (2022) argues that the advertising campaign for a new version of Cinevisor which featured *Sandokan* was very successful. The ad's emphasis lay

12 I contacted Roberto Cepparo and interviewed him on January 2023, he worked for I.E. International until the beginnings of the 80s and later gave the library to his brother which renamed it Cinehollywood, a company that still sells DVDs.

13 Mary Comin has written also in her Master Thesis about Mupi and the different Super8 options this company was offering for home entertainment (Comin 2016).

on the specificity of this Super8 version: 'Sandokan now every day on the screen with colors,' it claimed. The possibility of watching it 'every day' would offer a new on demand viewing practice, but also the hint to 'colors' was referring to the TV version, which had aired it in black and white.

A Spanish version was distributed apparently by Gofer Film (lead by producer José Pascual Boluda Geva) thanks to an agreement between SACIS and BRB International, a Spanish company which later produced animated series of which one based on Sandokan's story.

The catalogues of I.E. International are listing both English and Italian versions of *Sandokan* on Super8. Angelo Arpaia on *Stampa Sera* announces in November



Fig. 2. Picture of a Super8 with cartridge of Sandokan distributed by Mupi. Source: <https://obsoletemedia.org/mupi-cinevisor/cinevisor-rear/> (CC License)

Sandokan

produzione RAI ORTF BAVARIA TITANUS

stampa TECHNOSPES

Il celebre film che ha battuto tutti i record di gradimento alla televisione italiana.

- S-1/3 **La tigre della Malasia**
avventuroso - con Kabir Bedi, Carole André e Philippe Leroy
3 bobine 120 mt. colore sonoro
- S-4/6 **Sandokan alla riscossa**
avventuroso - con Kabir Bedi, Carole André e Philippe Leroy
3 bobine 120 mt. colore sonoro
- S-7/9 **La Tigre non è morta**
avventuroso - con Kabir Bedi, Carole André e Philippe Leroy
3 bobine 120 mt. colore sonoro
- S-10/12 **La caduta di Mompracem**
avventuroso - con Kabir Bedi, Carole André e Philippe Leroy
3 bobine 120 mt. colore sonoro

SANDOKAN edizione corta

- S-14 **Un re per Mompracem**
il film con la bellissima canzone "Sandokan" degli Oliver Onions (dischi RCA)
1 bobina 60 mt. colore sonoro
- S-13 **I tigrotti di Mompracem**
il film con la battaglia di Mompracem
1 bobina 120 mt. colore sonoro

Fig. 3.
A digitization of the Italian catalogue of I.E.- International and the different versions of Sandokan on Super8. Source: private archive, courtesy of Andreas Chmielewski.

1976 the incoming arrival of a full-length version of *Sandokan* on Super8 reduced by RoPo (Arpaia 1976). That version, argued the journalist, would be sold in four boxes of three reels each, every box at a price of 75.000 lire or the complete full version for around 300.000 lire. Adjusting those prices for inflation the cost would be today around 1400 Euro for the complete series. In the I.E. International catalog this full version contains all the original six episodes, divided in four boxes of three reels of 120m (ca. 17min) each. They offered both copies with sound or without sound and other abridged versions. For instance, in an Italian catalog, we can find *Sandokan's* 'short edition' with two reels one of 60m (entitled 'the battle of Mompracem') and the other one of 120m with a clear emphasis on the famous soundtrack of *Sandokan* by the Italian duo Oliver Onions. The full versions of the four boxes have explanatory texts in the catalog which point out the presence of actors within the series, like Kabir Bedi, Carole André, and Philippe Leroy.

The German version was distributed by Piccolo Film in four episodes, with each box of one reel of 110m, with color and sound. It was therefore much shorter than the I.E.-International version with a duration of approximately 60 minutes. This version has been digitized and distributed by Alive! AG Vertrieb in the 'Sandokan Komplettbox DVD' version, which features the complete series digitized from a 16mm print and the Super8 one from Piccolo. Piccolo Film, as the former employee Michael Teubig said, had its own editor¹⁴, who made the version that was later approved by Teubig himself (who supervised ad text and editions) and had the responsibility of creating a coherent narrative despite cutting a big part of the film. This German reduction includes the beginning of the first episodes of the series and the last two episodes, but it has cut most of the romance between Sandokan and Marianna. The story, therefore, focuses on the antagonism between Sandokan and James Brooke. Some important dialogues are not featured in this version, such as the one between Marianna and his uncle, where she accuses Western imperialist colonizer mission.

The film was reduced not only from the original copy (which consisted of a 16mm copy)¹⁵ to a Super8 but was also cut in various places by the editors of the same companies that distributed the film. If the German version changes in part the story, while keeping a continuity in the narration, the Spanish version (as is shown on the cover of its 6 boxes, each supposedly with one reel) featured Marianna. That may suggest that the version was not abridged abruptly like the German by Piccolo Film, in fact it was also longer with reels of 120m each.¹⁶ The short episodes distributed by the Italian company Mupi are faithful to the

14 The editor of Piccolo, which cut most reduced versions which were not already bought as reduced copies, was a woman named Karin Fischer who worked also for Bavaria Film (another co-producer of *Sandokan* by Sollima).

15 Giacomo Manzoli mentions this in an article (2012a), also the digitized version from the German DVD refers to the quality of the original film copy on 16mm.

16 This information was taken from an announce with description from the Spanish website Todocollection.net, where a user is selling 6 reels of the complete version of *Sandokan* on Super8.

original story, but keep only highlights and the most action-packed parts of the story. What this latter abridged version makes clear (in 15 minutes) are the main characters, Sandokan, and his *tigrotti*, Marianna and Yanez, and finally the villain Brooke. Although strongly shortened, we can still see Sandokan's spectacular fight with the tiger, a very short camera shot where Sandokan and the tiger jump against each other creating an arc.

REDUCING SANDOKAN – EDITING THE MYTH

These versions, which survive because collectors and sellers are preserving and trading them online (they have several groups, and forums and produce fanzines on Super8), might of course not represent the whole range of Super8 abridged versions of *Sandokan* that circulated, but through them, we are able to retrace in part this specific distribution. What these fragments and the film catalogs make evident is that watching and owning abridged versions was maybe not the norm but a common practice for home movie viewing (for those who could afford it anyway). As Alexandra Schneider remarks, "reduction meant lowering prices and thus also lowering the threshold for prospective buyers". (2019, 138) This operation did not only condense scenes, cutting those parts considered less important to the overall plot, but the shorter the film, the less material costs would be involved, implying thus a sort of democratization. This did not mean that Super8 was affordable for everyone; in fact only a minority would buy complete versions.

As I mentioned before, a copy of a complete series (the actual televisual length of *Sandokan* TV series lasts around 360 minutes) would cost an outrageous amount, this meant that only few had access to complete versions. Generally, a Super8 version of a whole film would cost in Italy around 180.000 lire at the end of the seventies (so about 500 euro) and shorter versions were of course much cheaper, around 25 to 50 euro for a 45m reel.¹⁷ The so-called 'full version' of *Sandokan* marketed and sold by I.E. International makes it hard to believe that it was a full-length version. Since it consisted of a total of 12 reels of not even 20 minutes each, the reels could have lasted ca. 240 minutes and thus there must have been cuts. The German version lasts only around 60 minutes. Anyway, these were the longest versions available, while the others were as short as lasting not even 1 minute, as is the case of Mupi cartridges for their Cinevisor. The high cost can explain why extremely short versions with extracts of only 1 minute were able to circulate.

These films had a novelty to offer: the possibility of a new modality of cinema experience, 'finally at home' and 'whenever you want,'¹⁸ as the ads were marketing

17 This information is gathered from different editions of the magazine *Cinema in casa* (from 1978 and 1979), a periodical for film collectors and people interested into Super8 and other small gauges.

18 A similar pitch was used by the company Circe Film already in '74, which marketed 8mm and Super8 abridged versions on its catalogues with the sentence 'Il

them. And, with *Sandokan*, moving from the small screen to the big screen, with colors instead of black-and-white. Even if the text of the film did not match the original work to which it referred to, these reduction prints could be considered as fragments reminding us about the TV series itself, a sort of analogic equivalent of short clips on YouTube today. Super8 abridged versions were not the only way through which *Sandokan's* story spread. They were just part of a larger film configuration, which entailed different media and participatory practices.

SANDOKAN'S SUPER8 DISTRIBUTION AS SYNECDOCHE OF A LARGER CULTURAL PHENOMENON

The phenomenon *Sandokan* was, as Giacomo Manzoli argues, one of the first Italian operations of merchandising, and *Sandokan* can be considered as a sort of television Blockbuster (Manzoli 2012b). Super8 was part of a huge merchandise campaign, thus part of a larger media configuration of different products tied to the film and to the copyright owners, thus SACIS and RAI. Since *Sandokan* was later screened in theaters and had a sequel in 1977 it is difficult to say if merchandise worked also as promotional products, so-called tie-ins.¹⁹

The examples are numerous, starting from Super8 and the shortest abridged versions for children by Mupi. Copyrights were sold to game companies like Editrice Giochi²⁰. This Italian company sold a board game inspired in the story of *Sandokan*. Panini, the still reknown publishing company, distributed a sticker album (they sold up to 15 million stickers in Italy) not only about the TV series but also for its sequel that was distributed theatrically (Manzoli 2012b). Mattel issued a Big Jim version of *Sandokan* and a version of his pirate boat as a playing kit.²¹ To this children's merchandise, we can add several photoplays, books by Salgari with a cover of Sollima's film, and the soundtrack's album by the Oliver Onions.

The Super8 film of *Sandokan*, either a 'full version,' a shortened extract, or simply a rather unfortunate abridged version, would still 'refer to its original' as a synecdoche, as a part of what the whole collective experience of a cultural myth constitutes. Giacomo Manzoli (2012) remarks that *Sandokan's* success happened along the growth of counter-cultural participative and underground culture in Italy. He notes that Sollima did nothing else "than going back to origins to complete that phase of 'second modernization' that political and cultural

film che desiderate all'ora che preferite' (the film you wish, at the time you prefer).

19 Wasko, Phillips, and Purdie (1993) in this seminal article they distinguish between merchandise and tie-ins, the latter ones as being mostly promotional products that would boost and advertise an incoming film.

20 On the website of BoardGameGeek there is also a French edition of the game.

21 In Italy it was sold by Mattel at the price of 9.900 Lire (around 30 euros).

institutions in Italy long tried to avoid".(Manzoli 2012b, 78) (My translation) Many of the generation that grew within that media configuration, do remember playing Sandokan as kids. This is still traceable on Social Media accounts dedicated to the TV series and comments on YouTube. *Sandokan*, as Manzoli argues, is much more and much less of what had been seen at the time.

In the last years rumors have been circulating about a next film dedicated to Sandokan, casting a Turkish actor like Can Yaman. The production company Lux Vides in collaboration with RAI Fiction has announced that the series is actually in production and is set to be released in 2025 (luxvide_WP 2024). The series will be directed by Jan Maria Michellini and Nicola Abbatangelo, and will have an international cast. Although we cannot say much more about this next series, we can today say that the success of Sollima's *Sandokan* did show how Italian public television's rigid structure in the seventies did not stop, but rather profited from its expansion beyond the small screen.

This expansion coincided with the first international efforts of small companies of developing successful distribution networks for home movie entertainment. Not far different from the libraries of 16mm or 9,5 mm, Super8 was at the end of the seventies, the cheapest option for home movie entertainment. To keep the children busy or re-experience *Sandokan's* adventures. *Sandokan's* original TV series and its Super8 reductions and merchandise are therefore together part of what we might call following Vinzenz Hediger's and Miriam de Rosa's term a 'film configuration'(De Rosa and Hediger 2016) that by subverting the primacy of cinema we can still consider as cinema. The success of the series by Sollima expanded a cultural myth, giving a distinct image to the figure of Sandokan. More difficult is to argue if the series has contributed to its anti-colonial legacy. The geographical dimension of its success is testified by the circulation and the variance of *Sandokan's* versions and storylines. Europe's media landscape at the end of the seventies was at least ready to accommodate new audiences' needs, but the series profited as well from a combination of factors that had been well thought out, starting by giving the direction to Sergio Sollima. Thanks to his adaptation 'The tiger is still alive!'

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