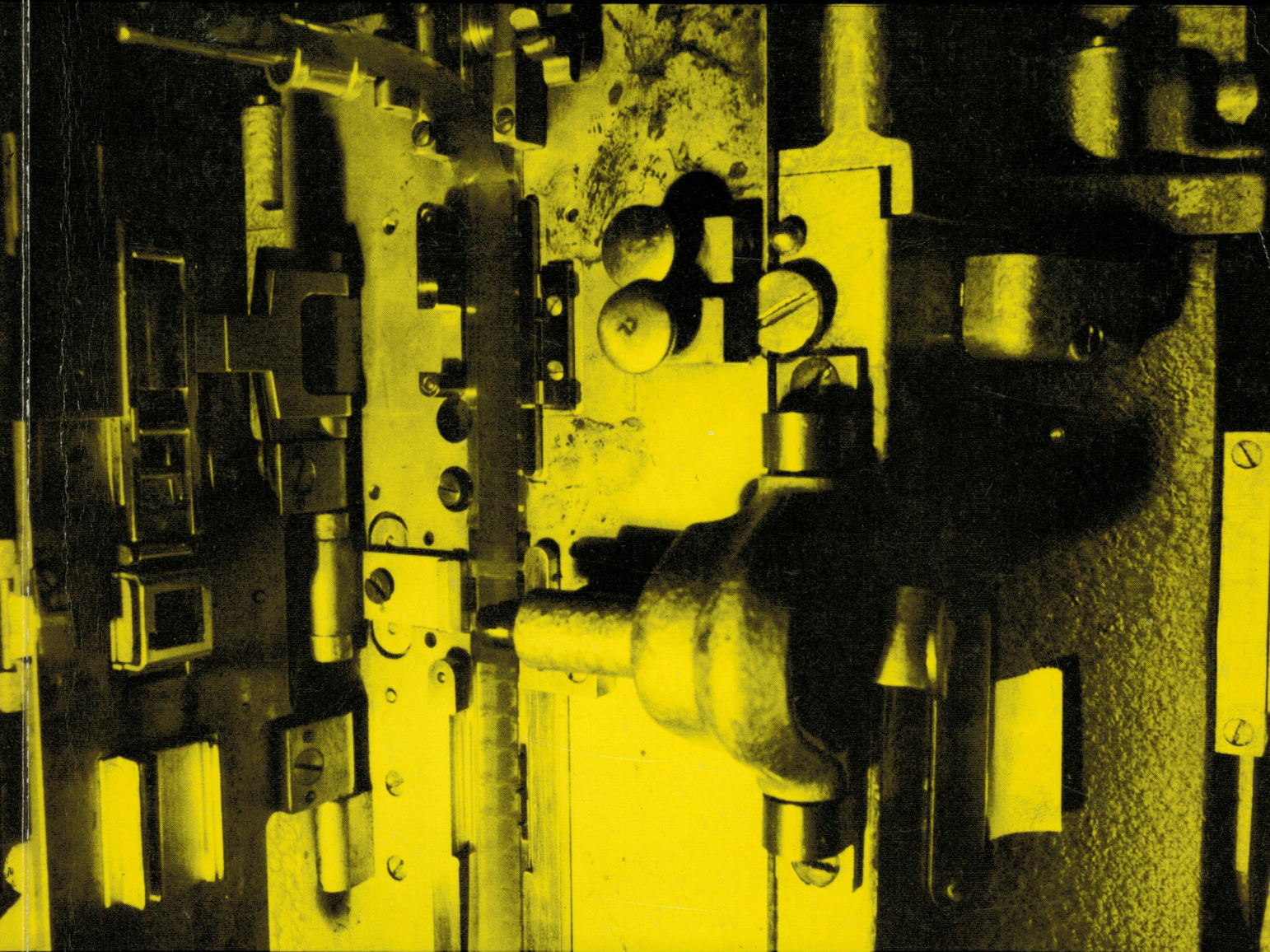


# 16

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*the magazine from the London Filmmakers' Coop*

# UNDERCUT

Having been 'trained' in the 'fine' (individualistic?) arts, I approached forming the Archway Road Movie Group with some trepidation. With a history of confining my 'cultural productions' in painting, printmaking, sculpture and film-making almost exclusively to my personal work and rarely collaborating with others in any carefully considered way, this was to be a departure. The formation of a Group, however, was required on two counts. Firstly, the purpose informing any production was based in wresting from the established media (TV, radio and newspapers) the right to exclusively represent what had become a national issue — urban motorway building and the fifteen-year-long opposition mounted by the community: the community was to control its own representation in opposition to norms of professional journalism which are based on no direct experience or knowledge of the matters being represented. Secondly, the scale of the project — an experimental agit-prop documentary departing from norms of TV representation but intended for both wide (international and national) and local audiences — required a technical production mode which would have, in part, to be based on industrial crewing norms where the basic demands of lighting, camera operation, sound recording, logging, synchronisation etc. could be achieved with a minimum wasting of time and energy.

Taking each of these points in turn, the Group was first established in the following way. After extensive local advertising, a public meeting was called in April 1982 and was exceptionally well-attended by local residents whose curiosity had been aroused by the possibility of being responsible for their own film about the most pressing problem in their communal life, and by an opportunity to fight back against the media's frequently libellous representations of their actions and the resultant backlashes of lies, smears and intimidation. At this meeting a volunteer group of 23 individuals was established and weekly meetings followed where the aims of the project/production and possibilities of funding were considered and pursued. Membership of the group was based on two demands made on its members: that they lived locally and were wholly opposed to motorway building. This second demand caused the only friction the Group ever faced internally since it demanded that we expel two individuals who, it had become apparent, had joined with the sole intention of thwarting our aims. Once these two *agents provocateurs* were ejected, the Group's project proceeded with encouraging speed as all members produced discussion papers on everything from the Group's ideological foundations, through to specific scene proposals, suggested modes of production and theories of representation. Remarkably, virtually all the idealistic objectives laid down by individuals in these early meetings appear in the final film, *Road Movie*.

In the meantime, however, production funding for *Road Movie* was becoming elusive despite early enthusiasm from Channel 4, then about to start transmission but already over-budget in its independent film/video commissioning. But quite a few of the members had experience in film or video or television, which enabled us to consider what we could proceed with practically whilst awaiting funds and thus avoid the possibility of Group apathy and disenchantment with the project. The motorway was raising its ugly head again and the issue becoming very

hot. Some of us were already members of the Co-op and others were sometimes lapsed members, knew of its existence or were simply interested in it. With my own camera and access to some extremely cheap stock, we started making local newsreels just as the Government unleashed its latest set of plans. The cheapness of our production base (including the processing and printing facilities of the Co-op) meant that we were able to retain our openness and fluidity as a community-based group and allow ourselves very high shooting ratios, which meant that we were able to RESPOND to people and events, rather than pre-scripting or superimposing a structure in advance of LEARNING from practical experience what it was that such a production unit as ours could do, or indeed should do. Surprisingly again, there was remarkably little disagreement among us despite differing backgrounds in experimental film, structural film, community work, television documentary and research etc. Local authorities promised us a total of £2,000 and we had already shot quite a lot with local donations. This enabled us to produce *Newsreel One — The Build-up*, cut at the Co-op where we held a couple of production meetings in order to show work-in-progress and respond to criticisms from those not otherwise involved in the cutting for reasons of alternative employment. Whilst *The Build-up* was being shown widely at public meetings in community centres, pubs etc. and was available on free loan from local video stores (film shows alone producing an audience of over 2,000 in three months) *Newsreel Two — We Object* was already in production as we had secured a further £2,000 from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

By this stage the agit-prop nature of the Group was becoming increasingly concrete as we attended public inquiries, taking an active part in fighting motorway proposals and bolstering public opposition simply by being present with our cameras and taking an ACTIVE role. We were soon involved with groups all over North and East London and had learnt enough to be of practical assistance to other campaigners.

To get back to my second point, about crewing, I should point out that throughout the production of the newsreels there was very little demarcation of jobs. Shooting days were infrequent and anyone who could show up would do so and find work to do. Clearly, those without other commitments or, alternatively, with more commitment to the practicalities of production, did more work than the others. Nonetheless, the films were released with credit only being given to the group collectively and with thanks to the local people and the Co-op. Simultaneously, however, we had to recognise that it had been necessary to form a 'Production Group' which was smaller than the original group of 23, although this Production Group was still open to all members of the Group who could find the time to be in it. The result was that the larger Group remained responsible and was consulted by the Production Group while that latter was made-up of those with some film experience or who wished to learn. This continued to be an effective division of labour throughout the Group's production existence, enabling access whilst allowing those committed to the practicalities of production as well as to the project to concentrate on the work in hand and enabling the germ of 'crewing' to develop. The latter was extremely necessary for reasons I have



already given, but also because at this point those who had put in endless hours of work *did* want that to be recognised. In addition to this, we had just been successful in obtaining a GLC grant/loan to produce *Road Movie* — the film we had all originally set-out to make.

Intensive scripting sessions followed which demanded a great deal of time in order to fully develop the ideas that had already become established at our weekly meetings, months before. These sessions were made up of anyone able to make the commitment within the Group, but were predominantly Production Group members who were to become crew members of *Road Movie* since that production would require unprecedented commitment on behalf of all of us (28 days constant shooting, in fact, with extensive travelling and, in the event, the final three days without sleep!). In addition to finishing the script (still kept loose and responsive), budget and shooting schedule, these meetings also enabled us to agree final crewing arrangements necessary for such a hectic and demanding schedule.

A collective project is almost bound to start with idealistic enthusiasm which is usually inclined to get bogged-down in the disparate intentions of the collective members. We, however, had already decided our subject the day the group was formed and the outline for *Road Movie* had been established for some time before we began scripting. Therefore the script, the aim and the nature of the film were once again not a bone of possible contention as these are almost certain to become in looser, less directed collective projects. All we now needed was to become more specific in our script. The specificities were noted and absorbed into the treatment we already had, updating that treatment until it finally became a workable script — which is only to say that we had by now decided *where* and *how* to get what we had wanted for some time! In other words, a specific grouping which was also accessible but with specific aims had developed an idealistic outline, worked through practical

experience on two 25-minute films and produced a more specific outline/script with a schedule of how to achieve it.

Because of this, I am convinced that there never arose any marked contradictions of the all-too-common 'collective versus individual' variety. The production base from the word 'go' avoided this contradiction in terms of both the individual and Group relationship to the work and of contradictions within the work itself.

Fortunately, we had never secured funding from any established film funding bodies, (the GLC money came from the Transport Committee, not the Arts and Recreations Committee) and so we were at all times completely free of usual production restraints and petty-minded accounting.

In a way, I regret that all this sounds incredibly rosy and lacking in the kind of contradictions that might be exposed in the analysis of a critical production from which others may learn, like 'This was a mistake' and 'Don't do that . . .'. In defence, all I can say is that such production bases (despite vague ideas about community video etc.) are extremely rare and as this exercise is therefore unlikely to be repeated I am content to have the arrogance to applaud it!

I would like to finish with two quotations which (unconsciously, in some respects) the Archway Road Movie Group successfully dealt with. First, I think it was Joris Ivens who said something like 'Learn to film mountains before you start trying to film people' (ie. don't pretend to know more than you do, or, things are more complicated than they seem, or, if you don't *know* what's smack against your face then you certainly don't *know* what's going on elsewhere). Secondly, when working as a film critic, Jean-Luc Godard found it necessary ' . . . to first of all answer the question "Why?" in order then to be able to answer the question "How?" ' I hope that makes sense.

Richard Philpott