

**DESPITE**

**TV**

Despite TV is a video cooperative based in London's East End. They presently run a policy of cheap access to video production and post-production facilities which is open to all members of the community. They also train their own members in all the stages of production in an attempt to demystify the machinations of the media. They have produced 13 magazine type tapes, their style pre-dating the youth magazine programmes taken up by television. The group are probably better known nationally amongst video enthusiasts and activists alike for their tapes on the Wapping dispute in 1986 (*Despite the Sun*) and their documentary around the national Anti-Poll Tax demonstration in London 1990 (*Battle of Trafalgar*). Of *Despite the Sun*, one critic wrote: '(it) equals and excels most of the broadcast material because they know the area better, and because they are in struggle, taping police attempts to stop both themselves and a BBC crew from taping, while the BBC failed to cover the story at all ... The effect of the tape itself is not to document as such ... The effect is not one of clear explanation, rational reportage, balance. It is of urgency, even desperation, of confusion and the constant threat - and frequent actuality - of violence.' (Sean Cubitt)

Malcolm Dickson spoke to DTV members Mike Steventon, Chris Kilby and Frank Mueller.

**Q: How did *Despite TV* come about, what kind of ideas were circulating amongst its original members?**

**A:** It started in 83/84 out of Tower Hamlets Arts Project Bookshop which had some funding from GLC and GLA for community video. They originally had a B/W reel to reel and they got some money and a worker and a colour Ferguson VHS portapak. There was an idea to start up a video magazine to get people involved working on and in the videos. It would be about local things and would attempt to touch on political things in the area of Tower Hamlets. The first thing I shot myself was when Thatcher visited the Docklands, which I think was her first visit; and we shot the commotion that it caused. We continued to shoot various other things throughout the history of the mags which went on from '86 to '89.

An idea behind the mag was that we hoped that it might tie into cable television when that started and would have some opportunity when they started giving out franchises. Originally there was this thing built into cable that they would have to provide a community information channel, and we were hoping to take part - if not run it - because we were doing all that stuff beforehand and still are. At the time it was all new although there was the model in the States and Canada. That's what we wanted here. But the cable thing all started falling to bits, so the extra trimmings - like community access channels - were the first to go. It's mostly Americans who've bought it and they're only interested in Data Communication, not in making television at all. But we kept making the magazine and what we did was take it around ourselves, to pensioners clubs, youth clubs and anywhere else that people gathered in sufficient numbers. At one time it was showing to about 800 pensioners an issue and there was, for a while, a magazine coming out every month for the first ten numbers. It was very touch and go: the audience

varied a lot which was good, but it was a lot of work, and it was hard to get around to these places. We worked at that for a long time, but we wanted to get the distribution sorted out. We tried various things - the video shops weren't interested because there was this whole set-up where the frontage is all tied up with major distributors and with feature films. We tried pubs, but they're all controlled by the big breweries as to what they could play and the laws were quite strict then. We tried community distributors and we couldn't even get them to distribute us. There was the possibility of libraries, but the only library that had video was in Docklands and it was funded by LDDC (London Docklands Development Corporation) to do that. At that time the libraries were in dispute because the unions didn't want to handle videos, they were trying to get a better pay deal and they saw this as an extra thing being added to their workload.

We started to think that there must be some other way to do things. The Miner's strike happened and we devoted a large part of a magazine to that. That was successful, we ended up with a tape that was really popular and was sold and bootlegged on picket lines. It gave us the idea of focussing around things a bit more. When something happened in our area we decided to maybe make a whole tape about it because it was a local issue. It was really important and it was about the kind of things we were interested in, about how local areas were being restructured and how the politics were changing.

Our second single-issue tape was '*Despite the City*', which we got development money for. It's about the encroachment of the City on the Docklands and the East End and, in turn, the encroachment of the Docklands on the East End. Property prices were going up and the East End was getting squeezed in the middle. We worked on '*Despite The Poll Tax*' for about six months. As a part of that tape we wanted to record the Anti-Poll Tax demonstration, when that happened on March 30th 1990. We went along to that to film it just as a part of this tape we were making, and then it ended up the Police turned it into a riot. We had all this unique footage, because a lot of the press weren't there from the beginning - we had four cameras there so we recorded it from just about every angle. We also got offers from people who were on the march to use their footage. We went to Channel 4 and said we that we wanted to make a TV programme about it, that we had all this stuff and that we were well versed in the background of it. We'd been making a tape up until then, some footage from which we showed them, which resulted in us being commissioned, and so '*Battle of Trafalgar*' was made. That took six months and then we screened it and we got a lot of response which was really good and supportive. We took it to some festivals and made some quite good contacts for future work.

**Q: How were the earlier tapes funded? What kind of local political infrastructure, in terms of funding, could allow a group such as yourself to make things that were explicitly political, and certainly outside the control of the local parliamentary state?**

**A:** In the beginning we weren't funded, it was a combination of the culture that existed at the time: the GLC was still around, there was the Workshop sector which was quite large at the time and there were a lot of groups, like Lambeth Video and London Video Arts, and other places that were doing access video. So there was an environment around independent film and video which has died off to a large extent since the change in attitude and politics in the late 80's. Of course, a lot of the people who got involved in DTV then





Despite TV on location

- as now - were unemployed and were getting politicised by being unemployed, so we were attracted to this kind of communication method, because we wanted to say things about what we thought was wrong and what we were experiencing. But when it came to applications for funding, there was money around through the GLC and GLA. Also, the local borough was Labour at the time. We got funding from those various sources at various times, it wasn't always all of them, sort of mix and match really. But as that started to disappear it became more and more difficult to operate, also some of the grant giving bodies changed their politics and started asking for more training oriented things and they weren't giving us very much leeway in terms of what they wanted for the grant they were giving. They were setting our agenda and eventually it came to a point where there wasn't enough money to bother towing their line, so we decided to set up a co-op, break free and start to earn money. That was when *Despite TV* started making contact - we'd been in contact with Channel 4 before - but things started happening when we got development money for *Despite the City*. Although we were still getting some funding at the very beginning, it wasn't very long before we shifted over to being able just to make programmes and make enough money just to do it without funding. At the moment we are not funded by any agencies

**Being based in the East End, the whole function of the tapes seems to be to engage and encourage a local community in a dialogue but also to encourage support for certain campaigns. Is this your main function?**

**A:** I haven't said much about access which is what we were and are about a lot. Our vision - I guess - was to see television change into what we were trying to be, or for us to provide a doorway into television, so that maybe we could provide a space maybe within, say, Channel 4, which seemed the most acceptable area for it to exist: to try and create a way for people in your street, basically, to be able to make video and get support, information, training and access to television. If we made these tapes we thought that at least some of it would end up on television so that other people would be inspired to do the same thing. We hoped that the thing would spread

and that there would be other groups set up in other places. There were other organisations up and down the country doing it, but in different ways. We were sick of watching television that was all made - almost entirely - by white middle class men. We were looking for a variety of voices and we were trying to have that happen in *Despite TV*. As well as the interest in television, there was the cable thing, which originally - as an idea - would be a local thing and so it would be possible to make things of local relevance. I mean this television thing's like a sideline that has only happened because cable failed in what a lot of people hoped it would do.

**Q: It hasn't disillusioned the group that much to make it want to cease to function. But with the collapse of coherent political opposition and the demise of the workshop sector, how do you see yourself operating, in comparison with earlier ideas of demystifying the whole notion of television and access?**

**A:** We're still doing that, but now we're demystifying how to run a business as well. We'd like the whole project to be all production, but in order to keep ourselves independent we have to engage in this business, which isn't ideal but it gives us freedom, and it's tough because sometimes you find yourself doing things that really you just don't want to do, but you have to have this longer term goal. I also think that having survived this long, and finding a lot of other workshops that haven't survived gives you a little more impetus to go on, and maybe we've got something that works with this co-op thing: everybody should theoretically be able to operate everything. One of the battles is to keep training everybody, so that we don't have *only* directors or *only* editors.

**Q: The workshop sector was founded on principles of access, training, the sharing of skills and the 'collective confidence' that comes out of that. Do you feel isolated as a result of the decline in the independent sector?**

**A:** Isolated seems the wrong word. We've always felt slightly

apart from the other workshops because we work differently, though we also felt a lot of kinship through productions. We don't have full time workers - everyone in the co-op is a worker - no one's on a salary here, there's a lot of volunteering, which means a lot of people working towards making this thing happen. People who stay with Despite TV get this thing out of it which is what the co-op's about. If you were just one or two workers from a normal community workshop and you go along to Channel 4 with some idea, and if they say 'You're wrong', well sometimes you feel wrong. But if you've got ten to twenty people and you've discussed everything beforehand and then you go to a meeting at Channel 4 you can say 'Wait a minute', because you've got all the arguments because you discussed it all with others who feel the same way. Because there are so many of us and we have a clear idea of what we are doing, we don't feel isolated so much as feeling independent. We don't know much about what is going on in the other groups and I think that's probably true of them as well. The network has fallen apart because of the funding disappearing, and there isn't so much grant aid anymore, so everybody has had to retreat to their own ground and we've all sort of suffocated. We have better contact with the rest of the world than we do with London. Here you don't get information from anywhere else about what's going on. **Independent Media** is about the only source of information. It used be that **City Limits** had a section, I used to read that all the time. Those things have all fallen away and there isn't the culture any more to support it in the same way. There's still the interest but the money to support it isn't there.

**Q: Using television as an example of a centre-out model which a group like Despite TV and many others challenge: it epitomises our relation to power which is exercised through notions of 'professionalism', which in turn cloaks the inherent class bias of the media industry. For example, shooting on lo-band or VHS is dismissed as 'amateur', and certainly 'not the proper way to present news'. Is the desire to challenge this an important part of the group's aim?**

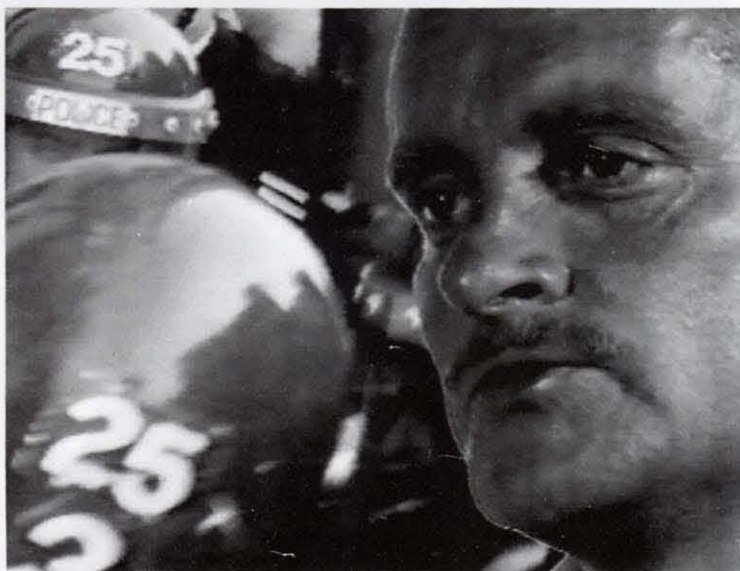
**A:** That's what we wanted all along from the beginning, but the support network's fallen down so now it's harder to do that. When we had grant aid we could have more people coming through the co-op and we could have more activity because we weren't spending much time trying to make money and make it run so we had more time to engage with people. And you know there are so many people making interesting tapes who haven't got enough money to make or finish them and they all come to us so now what is happening is that we are taking over from the funding bodies, we are becoming volunteer funding people. Like we are helping to finish projects. It's all very nice, but we've got some ideas too!

**Q: At the same time you've got the dangle of the carrot - the allure of higher production standards, the attraction of making that the priority. How do you cope with this?**

**A:** Well, the television thing is a double edged sword. Channel 4 has given us some freedom in that we don't have to depend on the funding bodies for our survival. With *Battle of Trafalgar* it was easier for them to say 'Yes', because we had something unique and because of that they could accept that it was shot on VHS and so on. Would they accept the VHS if it wasn't unique footage? I think maybe they would, but it's harder, so there is a kind of pressure when you think that what you

are making might be a possible for television - you try and up the standards. There are good reasons for this, because it doesn't help to represent someone in a really degraded way, it's not good to interview travellers, for example, and have really bad sound. People have to come across looking good, so on that level you improve standards, but as far as using equipment - and if we had the money - we would tend to go more for new technologies which are producing better quality but are still small and affordable. It's also more accessible because we don't have to train people for so long. It's not unnecessarily complicated and it isn't mysterious: all the buttons are labelled, whereas on professional equipment it's designed for people who have trained to be engineers or video editors or something. They don't have to put labels on because they know what these things are, so the technology's changing. I look forward to a day, possibly, when there is such a saturation of cameras out there that Despite TV won't have to have its own cameras, we'll just provide an edit facility which is available to all the people who are out there shooting stuff everyday. It does look as if there is going to be a home editing market, which will obviously be influenced by television. If that happens then I think we would be involved in trying to show people it could be used for other things, for communication of information and politics. We haven't really got to that point yet. That's not the situation here, but it is happening a bit in the States.

**Q: You mentioned earlier the problems of distribution and the possibility of tapping into the high street rental market. That was an**



**opportunity that was missed out on in its early days, before it was taken over by the larger corporate interests.**

**A:** Some people tried, it just didn't work. London's got 9 million people, while Toronto's got 2 million. In Toronto you have all kinds of independent video shops which hire obscure things, but they do it with a cross section, so they have some political, some B-movies, art films, a variety of stuff. Here, you'd think that out of the 9 million there be enough people to support at least one of these places. If you even forget the people who are trying to do it for political reasons, what about the entrepreneurs, the film buffs and all those different interest groups? Why hasn't this thing been set up by someone? Despite TV has got its hands full, but it would be nice to see someone set up independent distribution on the high street. I don't know why it hasn't happened.



The police officer's body language is aggressive, leaning forward with his arms extended. The man's expression is one of defiance or fear. The scene is chaotic, with debris on the ground and other participants in the background. The lighting is bright, suggesting an outdoor setting during the day.

The image is a high-contrast black and white photograph. The riot police are silhouetted against the lighter background of the street and buildings. The man in the plaid shirt is the central focus, his actions being the primary subject of the image. The background shows a large crowd and a prominent classical building, likely a government or institutional structure.

People used to think that if you had the means of production then you could make television. No way. It's the means of distribution that you need. The means to make it are important, but not nearly as important as being able to get out there and communicate. Television succeeds in stifling that, it just makes it so difficult, because there's such a gate-keeping thing where people are excluded from the media and having only four channels contributes to this. This country has got a really tough situation for gaining access. Channel 4 was like a major in-road into television and people all over the world envy it. It's almost an incongruity now, because the rest of the system's so tight, like radio's the same way. They used to tell us there wasn't room for more than four stations on the radio and that was the excuse for why there weren't more. It's the same with television. There's plenty of ways to have more television.

**Q: Working with Channel 4 on *Battle of Trafalgar* was productive then?**

A: It was pretty good. Channel 4's been under pressure from the outset to change their politics and so the part that's about access and about new and interesting forms of television has been squeezed a lot. **Alan Fountain** was our contact and he understands what we're trying to do and wants to support it. He's provided us with a lawyer to keep us and them from getting into *difficulties* concerning the legal aspects. The Police and Criminal Evidence Act has never been pushed, so in some ways I think they were probably thinking that if it's going to happen it will happen to *Despite TV*. Let's sit back and see how far you can push it, that sort of thing. But they footed all the bills for that, and we were really well covered.

We had to negotiate the contract quite a bit to accommodate the notion that a *co-op* can make television with the right resources, and anybody could do it without having years of television experience.

**Q: Weren't there constraints imposed? What about the editing process?**

A: We did it in sections so that the people who shot certain sections, say from Kennington Park to Westminster Bridge would sit down and edit that. But we discussed it collectively at regular meetings. Channel 4 didn't tell us what to do or how to edit but it was very restrictive having an hour to tell something that happened over ten hours. What do you leave out?

**Q: What sort of problems did you encounter with the *Free for All* commission?**

A: That was a sub-commission through the company that was commissioned by Channel 4 to do the series. We couldn't get a contract with them until we were a week into the project. The guy controlling it - a professed socialist - just stalled on the contract, so we nearly didn't make the programme, because like a day before the shooting was supposed to start, he was saying '*oh we can't agree this contract, we're not going to make this programme*', and the next thing we know we are making it. It was just all over the place, the guy was really uncomfortable. In the end we did start making it and we shot all this stuff, and he wanted to see every stage; most of the time he missed the point that, for example, a rough edit is not something that is finished! It came to the stage where we were doing the on-line edit and he's still trying to make changes, having spent most of the budget doing this on-line and he's stalling it by saying, '*I don't want this in there, I don't want that*', and some of the things he was contesting

was stuff he'd already said was fine; but the particular thing that was a real problem for us was that he didn't like the titles that we'd put on people, which gave the name and the group that they were involved or aligned with. He felt this wasn't good and that Channel 4 wanted 'ordinary' people, and these people weren't ordinary because they belonged to groups. We refused to take off the titles on the basis of that twisted logic that as soon as an 'ordinary' person joins a group they're null and void and don't have a voice anymore. We delivered the tape but said that we don't want a credit. In the end they did edit out these bits, it looked really crap because they edited a generation down and also they put a credit for us. That was a really nasty experience. The unfortunate thing was that the people that we interviewed had agreed to talk to us because of our integrity, so to all intents and purposes they're being shafted.

**Q: What is in the pipeline then and what's the direction for the group?**

A: We may embark on a project about the politics of redevelopment and how it's a classic rip-off, and illustrating how monetarism, Thatcherism, and maybe the LDDC fit in with developers. We're also making a tape which is based around a shoot we did at Gay Pride which may be about the politics of being gay and lesbian at this time, but with a whole range of ideas: about self-examination, being black and gay or lesbian, equal opportunities, being out of work, Outrage.

As a result of *Battle of Trafalgar*, we've been going to a lot of festivals and we've made a lot of contacts. We've actually managed to sell the screening rights of *Battle of Trafalgar* to educational television in Ontario, and there are things that can be done over there and probably over in Europe as well. Even though we're based in a locality and we're talking about local things, the politics of what's going on have repercussions all over the world.

**Q: Do you think an oppositional impetus might resurface again if you just keep carrying on what you're doing in terms of trying to network and get access to media and to culture? Do you think it might be radically different from what it was in the 80s?**

A: Well, it is radically different from the 80's, because the only people that are really left are those that are really vehement about it, so you've lost all the liberal sorts. Those left are consolidating themselves and maybe just keeping their heads low because it's not the easiest time to function. But I think we're kind of working it out, it looks like there's not a lot going on outside, but there's a lot going on inside. We're restructuring ourselves and finding how to make this thing work and we're going to be a lot stronger when we come through this - I think that is when we'll start to grow and become more visible.

