# Cinema Action.

## Beginnings.

Gustav (Schlacke) Lamche - Ann Guedes (formerly Lamche)

Schlacke's account is drawn from 3 interviews conducted in 1996.
Ann now lives in Portugal and her account was taken from telephone conversations at the end of 1996 and beginning of 1997.

Note. Before Ann and Schlacke arrived in England in 1968 they had lived in France for four years and before that in Germany. Schlacke is German, Ann British but with a French mother.

### Schlacke

SL Ann started Cinema Action when we were barely in Britain. We had a small family, 3 children, and we had been thrown out of Paris by the French Government, lost of course our jobs in Paris - Ann had a responsible position at the ORTF, the French radio and television station, doing news bulletins in the English section and I had various freelancing jobs.

MD Why were you thrown out?

SL The French Government thought our further presence in France was not conducive to the welfare of the French nation!

They appointed a new Interior Minister and his first act was to throw Ann and me out of France. Twenty people came to our flat and interrogated us, broke the floorboards open with crowbars and threatened, intimidated our family out of their wits - our eldest boy was about 8 years old. I was writing poetry at the time and, to know where to put the stress when I was reciting it, I made a little mark underneath the vowels. So, these policemen, twenty of them with six or seven who spoke fluent English, fluent German, were absolutely startled by my poems - I had them hung in long reams from the ceiling on telex paper. They saw this as some amazing form of global communication because I had some marks there which didn't correspond to the usual conventions of language. God knows what little theories they had!

We were brought to the Interior Ministry and next day we were transported to the German border in 2 armoured cars. We later learned that we were the avant garde of 500 people which they had thrown out of France. It was on the 9th June 1968.

### Ann

AG I knew people in the SDF, the German Student Movement, and in French revolutionary groups but I was not an organiser. Daniel Cohn-Bendit was a friend and used to come to our flat but that was before he was a political figure.

I was working at the ORTF in 1968 and when the attempt was made to assassinate Rudi Dutschke I was on duty the night the news came through and I passed it on directly. The German group got hold of the French groups and there was a meeting in our flat when they all agreed to appear together for the first time. (Before, even on Vietnam, they would not come out together.) When May came I was on strike and involved with what the ORTF workers were doing. So, I took part in the events but was not a leader.

The police arrested me. Then they arrested Schlacke and took away all his work - not just poetry but plays, two novels, short stories, something he was working on with John Cage - and never gave it back. The loss affected him deeply.

Schlacke

MD Had you been politically involved before, in Germany?

SL The question is interesting because for me life is politics. So, I was, of course, very intensely living. I think every person is politically involved from birth.

MD What kind of work had you been doing in Germany?

SL I had my architectural practice in Frankfurt. My first commission was a student house and after that there was a factory, a couple of gas stations, the headquarters of Telefunken in Frankfurt. Our collective was called gruppe bau and was similar to Cinema Action but for building.

I met Ann at university, at the hochschule fur gestaltung which was the continuation of the Bauhaus after the 2nd World War. She was part of gruppe bau, responsible for the two-dimensional work, posters, letterheads, book covers.

MD Gruppe bau was a collective?

SL But it carried my name because, at that time, I had overall control.

MD In what sense was it collective?

SL Because there was a cash box and everybody took out what they needed and wrote in the book what they took out. That's the way we handled the rewards and salaries.

MD So, it was quite extraordinarily different from a normal company?

SL Yes. I had never heard of this method but I thought it was a very successful one because people knew how much cash had been generated collectively and could determine their own income needs.

There were, of course, also extraordinary things. For instance, we had a number of living-in artists who did not contribute to the product output at all but perhaps contributed to the lifestyle, say, for instance, playing the guitar at appropriate or inappropriate moments. And they also went to the cash box and took their cash.

MD Surely, the fact that you were doing business in that way was significant?

SL No, not at all. That is traditional where I come from. I come from a peasant background in Silesia and that's the way I remember my grandparents were. We would eat out of one big bowl there. My grandfather, the farmer, the main man, gets first place and then the people who work with him in the fields, in most cases Polish prisoners of war, would each take their spoon and eat the same thing. So, when we went to my grandparents, my brother and I, and got our spoons and ate out of that big bowl it was always a very great experience. I think, my notion of civilization, the need to work together and to enjoy yourself in a more than individualistic way has a lot to do with the way I learned to eat at my grandfather's house.

MD What happened about your architectural practice when you went to France?

SL I finished those contracts which I had already and then stayed in Paris and focussed more on writing. I saw that I could do more with words and then, when I was relating to film makers in Paris, with images, and that it was more effective in improving people's lot than building houses.

MD Did you start making films in Paris?

SL I got a commission to start research on a series with the Beatles in India which, in the end didn't come off. I also made the acquaintance of Richard Leacock who invited me to start a project with him, which also was never made but we spent a lot of time travelling together. So, my first influence in terms of film-making comes from Richard Leacock.

Cinema Action the First Phase

SL Ann wanted to raise money to import a French student film on the events of May 1968. It was about 90 minutes of married print of which perhaps half an hour were debates on the film industry but the other parts showed the debates amongst students and the street action, battles with police and some detailed studies of the occupation of factories. So, Ann started looking for support.

Richard Mordaunt was a crucial person. He had a film company in Mayfair called Lusia and he arranged a party for the purpose of raising funds for the import of the student film. £30 was raised and Ann sent the money to France for a print. Richard lent his projector and that was the beginning of the mobile cinema activity of Cinema Action.

MD Ann was working on her own for a while, with only Richard's support and then other people began to join. Who was in that early group ?

SL There was Humphrey Trevelyan who bought the truck we used for the mobile projector. Mark Karlin was there and there was also a strong American contingent - people who had dodged the draft or were frightened they would be drafted. There was Dana Purvis and Jane Grant who had a neg. cutting service in Covent Garden. But I did not take part at first.

MD Who saw the films?

SL It was multiplying. For example, we showed the French film in Dagenham at Fords and there were about 4 people looking and three of them were thinking about how to get to the pub. - four workers looking at a French film in French and three of them not interested in the film! But one

of the four was able to arrange a big showing at one of their main meetings. So, we had all of a sudden 2000 people looking at that film, in French - unheard of in Britain!

MD So, the work started by showing films and then you began to make your own?

SL A couple of very short cinetracts, were made, for instance, one about London transport. These were requests from people who came to the meetings. By now the first workers who had been at shows began to come to meetings.

Ann

AG. When we were making the cine tracts we were only getting very small donations from workers. It was a matter of taking collections.

We were helped to make the films because some people who had money were paying for things. They did it quietly and it was never really discussed. I felt it ought to be discussed. It was part of the reality of how we worked at that time and it meant we never knew exactly what the cine tracts cost.

Later on we started to get substantial donations from the workers. After UCS1 that really took off. Then, for some films, we received contributions of one or two thousand pounds. We were also given support in other ways. For instance, when we were filming at UCS we were sleeping on someone's floor and we didn't have a car but were transporting the double headed projector by bus. When the shop stewards found out they arranged a car for us and paid for us to stay in a hotel.

MD Eduardo Guedes was one of the UCS team, wasn't he? How did he come to join?

AG Eduardo was a draft dodger. (From the Portuguese colonial wars. ed.) He had come to Britain and gone to the London International Film School and then was asked to stay on as a tutor. He was already a brilliant editor and had made three films in Brazil. He was working on the steenbeck in Cinema Action on something of his own when I heard the workers were going to occupy the Upper Clyde Shipyards. I asked him if he would go up to Scotland with me to film the occupation. He said 'yes' and he filmed UCS1 and from then onwards he was part of Cinema Action.

Schlacke

MD How did you and Richard come to film in Free Derry?

SL We were a year into the practice of showing films. So, the word has spread and an activist in Derry phoned that we should come and bring some entertainment films for children. Derry was barricaded and had been cut off from the administration of the UK government.

This was when I met the Coopers. I had previously bought bulbs for our projector in Frith Street (At Contemporary Films ed.) and had chatted to the person who sold them and noted that he thought what we were doing was interesting. So, I spoke to him about our need for entertainment

films and he said I should go upstairs to see Charlie. Charlie wasn't there but I saw his wife, Kitty Cooper, who said, 'Yes, we are throwing away these piles of films because the sprockets are damaged' and she gave me about 16 feature films. So, I mended the sprockets and with these films and Richard's projector and camera and nagra we turned up in Derry.

Everything there was done with votes and motions. So, there was a motion and we were allowed to bring the camera in and we produced an amazing record.

MD You and Richard didn't finish the film together, did you?

SL About a year after shooting, for family reasons, Richard had to leave the UK. When he came back our ways separated. He looked at the film, which in the meantime I had continued, and he didn't dislike it but it was not the film that he was going to make. So, we agreed that he would make a dupe neg. and from the same material we would make two films. Richard's was called Ireland Behind the Wire , Cinema Action's had the title People of Ireland.

MD By the time Richard came back and you parted company other changes had taken place at Cinema Action, hadn't they?

SL The studio in Mayfair had been given up and the equipment now was with us and we had moved to rented accommodation in Kilburn, which was where the meetings took place. There were also a number of people living with us who had no where else to live, so the place was like gruppe bau again. The only thing was that there was no space. We had a small flat with about eight people living there, all to do with the mobile cinema, and the gear right in the middle of it, the children of course being very elbowed because they were basically living in a film studio. So, it was difficult.

Mark had left Cinema Action while Richard was away. Humphrey was also away. Then, when he and Richard returned, they formed Berrick Street Collective with Mark. So that was a split off from Cinema Action but with mutual adoration, because I liked Humphrey very much and Richard, I thought, was an important British film maker.

Some other early Members.

Humphrey Trevelyan. Member from 1969 to 1970.

Cameraman and Lecturer - Interviewed 1996.

HT I had been in South America for two years up until the Christmas of 1968. I came back to London and a Latin American contact there was in touch with Ann Lamche. So, we went round together to meet up with Ann, probably in February or March 1969.

MD Did you have a long-standing interest in politics or film or both?

HT I had become interested in film making in South America although I had done quite a lot of photography before and some 8mm. filming on personal projects. It had no political content at all then but there was an aesthetic search.

I don't think I was very politicised before I went out to South America. I'd done a degree in social anthropology at Cambridge and a sociology MA at the University of Essex. I initially went to Buenos Aries to do some sociology research. Then that rather fizzled out and I did some theatre with an Argentinian group - it was living theatre, anti-imperialist stuff.

When I got back to the UK my ideas for film projects were based on working with anthropologists I had met in Peru, in the Amazon jungle, but I was aware that great revolutions had occurred while I was away and all of a sudden England seemed to be transformed and I jumped into political film-making very enthusiastically.

At that time Cinema Action, to my knowledge, consisted of Ann Lamche and Richard Mordaunt, a 16mm. projector and a copy of a film of May/June '68. My friend and I joined and within a few weeks another 3 or 4 people came.

MD What was Richard Mordaunt's role?

HT He had set up a production company called Lusia Films with a couple of rather upper class friends of his - one of them was Lord Henry Herbert - and they had made quite high class corporate films for big people like BOAC and Richard particularly had concentrated on music films. He'd just finished a film on Otis Redding, They were quite successful and Richard himself was a very, very accomplished film maker. I don't think he ever went to film school but he just had a fantastic feel for the medium. He had celluloid fingers.

The company was in Mayfair, in Shepherds Market, a small but quite luxuriously appointed production house and I do not know still to this day quite what moved Richard towards taking a very radical position in relation to film. But in quite an extraordinary way he completely opened up all the facilities of Lusia Films to Cinema Action.

At that point the the work consisted of showing the French film and one or two others films to shop stewards' committees and one of the first things I did was to go up to a British Leyland factory which had gone on strike for the first time in 30 years.

MD How did the film go down?

HT I think there were mixed reactions. You tended to find in those days in shop stewards' committees a left Labour/Communist Party majority and then quite a large Trotskyist minority. This film that we showed is heavily critical of the French Communist Party. So, obviously, that didn't go down too well but they were terribly polite about it. That's what really struck me, how polite they were.

One of the reasons for going round doing the projections and the talks with shop stewards' committees was to get them interested in collaborating on film projects because at that time the British Shop Stewards' Movement appeared to be very militant and the idea was that Cinema Action was going to be a servicing agency for it.

This was very much influenced by the Continental experience. Although Schlake at that time was not directly involved in Cinema Action, clearly he and Ann thought very similarly and , if anything, the approach was syndicalist but with this strong, rather complex German imposition which came from Schlake and the various German friends that they had. I'd be hard put to define it now. The German SDF movement, Rudi Dutschke, and people like that were prominent because Rudi Dutschke was a very close friend of Schlacke. Later on it became influenced also by the beginnings of the women's' movement brought over by a couple of American members later on in '69.

MD How were decisions taken about what films to make and how to make them?

HT We used to have general meetings which would take an exceedingly long time - I think the record was 12 hours - and I think people were fairly autonomous. So, people proposed something and if there were enough people who supported it and there seemed to be the finance to do it, it was agreed.

MD You were, presumably, only having to pay for film stock and processing?

HT And transport. I, for instance, bought an old transit van which became the Cinema Action van and had a very honourable and chequered history in radical British politics.

MD What about paying for the film stock?

HT I think Lusia Films bore the brunt. Richard continued to do commercial work. So, he was able to make bits of money here and there. But certainly, what did happen after a while was that Lusia Films ran up huge accounts all round Soho and it all came to quite a crisis.

MD And then what happened?

HT That was later on, I think in 1970/71 and that really was one of the things that fuelled the mistrust and the aggravation particularly between Richard and Cinema Action.

I left because I wanted to go on a photographic, ethnographic trip with a Peruvian friend of mine to India. I think things had got very tense in Cinema Action but that was not the overt reason for me leaving.

Steve Sprung. - Member from 1970 to 1976.

Freelance film editor and independent film-maker. Interviewed 25/6/96

SS. I got involved with Cinema Action because I went to a showing of Fighting the Bill at a large political meeting against the Industrial Relations Act. I was at art college in London by then but my father was a Marxist Leninist and I'd gone to the meeting with a bunch of people from Coventry, from the political group he was part of.

Seeing that film was revelatory. It wasn't that it was a great film as a film. But it was direct and talked to working class people about things which were theirs. The people who spoke in it were

very powerful speakers and that was one thing that the working class movement had going for it: a strong tradition of oratory.

At the time I was trying to make a film about the Shrewsbury building workers who'd been charged with conspiracy for trying to cause an affray. So, I went to talk to Schlacke and in the process got involved with working with Cinema Action. Probably the reason I was accepted straight away was that I came from Coventry, from a working class background and very few of the people connected with Cinema Action then were from working class backgrounds.

MD Did you find that odd?

SS No. What I did find odd was that when I went to art college (St Martins) most people were ex public school.

MD Some of the people at Cinema Action had been to public school. Did you find their perception of working class life a bit abstract?

SS No, I found them very straight forward. They were very committed to what they were doing and very down to earth. Ann was a member of the same trade union, the AEU, which I joined because, when I left art college, I went to work in a car factory. She spent her time amongst working class people or people who were political revolutionaries. The people at Cinema Action didn't have dinner parties with middle class people at night and then mix with working class people in the day. It wasn't like that. They were squatters. Also amongst them there were a lot of foreigners. I didn't see them like the public school people at college who did seem to come from an alien class.

MD At the time you were in Cinema Action, how frequent were the showings?

SS In the early period we were showing films a couple of times a week, mainly in the evenings but also in the day, lunch hour screenings. With the Shrewsbury building workers' campaign we did a lot of showings on building sites organised through shop stewards.

MD Were the films adding anything beyond getting people together in a situation in which there could be a debate?

SS They were adding in something to do with the history which people who weren't active in it at the time wouldn't necessarily have known about and they were adding in other themes. If you take Fighting the Bill , it talked about the relationship between two ideals of democracy, working class democratic practices as opposed to bourgeois democratic practices and raised those ideas for discussion.

MD If they were shown where people were militant, wouldn't the audience already be familiar with the arguments?

SS No. When a film was shown on a building site everyone who was on the building site would be there. The people who organised the show would already be aware of those ideas but there were people on the building site who had not thought about them. They were also bringing new things in that, for instance, the Clyde film brings experiences of an occupation, something which no one would have been able to experience without seeing that film.

MD But you don't see what is really happening from a film - you only see a representation of it.

SS Of course, but the representation is that of, say, one of the shop stewards who ran the occupation. So, even if you went to the occupation, that is what you would see. It's not just film that does that. It happens in real life. You get a representation of something in the way that people articulate it.

MD In a case like the Clyde, where the people engaged in the occupation were from various political parties, would Cinema Action be more reliant on one group than another?

SS No, Cinema Action was more interested in an enabling action rather than in giving a particular line.

MD But how was the enabling process seen, because by filming some things and not others you are making judgments?

SS Of course.

MD Was that acknowledged?

SS It was acknowledged within Cinema Action. You were doing research, you saw yourself as active. But when films were shown it was represented as if the workers had made them which I felt was a misrepresentation because it denies that active element, that there is something coming from outside which acts as a catalyst.

MD Given that there was so little money and film is an expensive process, why didn't they move to video?

SS I suspect there were two reasons for this: one is the power of film that you don't get with a small screen and the other is that you have a large screen and you draw a large group of people.

MD Now you could show video on large screen.

SS Now you could but then you couldn't. It also had something to do with the discipline of a film-making practice, that you work with small amounts of footage. If you look at the Cinema Action films they are conceived as filmic as opposed to being like a tv programme; they are conceived of as almost epic: with <u>The Miners' Film</u> this is a film to represent the story of the miners, of their traditions and aspirations. It goes back to the Joris Ivens tradition of film making.

MD What did you do after you left the group?

SS I went to the Poster collective and then we made <u>Year of the Beaver.</u> about the Grunwick strike which took place in 1977, looking back on it from the 1980s .

MD You have said it couldn't have been made within Cinema Action. Why?

SS The strength of Cinema Action films is that they are made very much from within the situation whereas <u>Year of the Beaver</u> is made in a situation which is being represented by the people involved in a way which was totally at odds with the reality. So I had to take a much more independent position. But it couldn't have been made by someone who hadn't worked with Cinema Action. Because people who worked with Cinema Action went through a whole experience and a whole practice over a lengthy period of time where they became educated and became able to relate to working class struggles, be part of them, be able to film them. Its not the

kind of thing you can read about. It only comes out of the experience of working in a situation, of being engaged in it.

Dave Douglass Member of Cinema Action from 1971.

Miner and NUM activist. Interviewed 23/11/96

Note Dave Douglass was one of about 20 trade unionists who worked closely with Cinema Action. Others include Mike Cooley of DATA, Don Cook and Dick Jones, Jimmy Reed and Jimmie Airlie of the AUEW.

MD When was your first contact with Cinema Action?

DD It was the time of the UCS occupation. A lot of other things were going on then and, in Doncaster, our house often had people from different revolutionary organisations staying en route. Cinema Action came on their way back down from Clydeside and after that we became lifelong comrades with frequent exchanges of people. When we went to London we would stay in the Cinema Action centre and before that in the houses that they squatted - 'we' being members of the various socialist organisations I belonged to.

MD What organisations?

DD At that time I was on the fringes of the Revolutionary Workers Party (not to be confused with the Workers Revolutionary Party) but we had a miner's organisation, the Mineworkers' Internationale, which brought together people from different positions: Maoists and Trotskyists and members of the Communist Party There was cross involvement with all kinds of organisations, like the Agit-prop Bookshop, which was in Gower Street and later moved to Bethnal Green, and the History Workshop. A lot of us thought the revolution was round the corner and it was time to start arming the masses and Cinema Action was part of that arming.

MD Which of the Cinema Action films were you involved in?

DD The student film, The Miners Film, Fighting the Bill.

MD What was your role - or roles?

DD Advising, helping to plan, working on policy. We set up a lot of the places where the workers were interviewed and scenes were shot.

I was part of the discussions, part of the team.

MD How did you and your comrades in the union see film contributing?

DD People like Lawrence Daly, who was General Secretary of the NUM at that time and Mick McGaghey saw films as being very important. You couldn't attend a world conference or a demonstration every week but a film could show you what was happening. That slogan, 'Dare to struggle we shall win, London Paris and Berlin' really struck a chord with my generation of young workers. We felt part of a whole European and world process and Cinema Action was

able to give you a window onto that and could introduce you to people who spoke French and German and took us away from the little England attitude which existed round trade union circles. Cinema Action were making films and showing films on the hoof. The people who were making the films were presenting them. It was a very exciting thing. They'd put films on in factory canteens, in bus depots, in dock areas, in ship yard assembly areas, in locations where there were masses of workers. The UCS film was shown at Plesseys during the occupation there. It's very evocative when you've got films thrown as a huge projection against a big factory wall showing images of workers in struggle!

The films were essentially made by the workers, particularly the UCS film where they had complete editorial control.

MD You mean the Shop Stewards' Committee had control?

DD Yes, and and there were criticisms of the way the occupation was run which could have been made in the film but weren't. There were arguments between those who wanted to take the struggle out and those who wanted to keep it a parochial fight. But overall, that was a film that everybody could live with.

MD With hindsight wouldn't it have been more interesting if the film had articulated those differences?

DD Well, it wasn't something that was put on and then people went home to bed. It was put on and engendered a discussion with the audience. So, all these arguments came out anyway.

MD Did you see some of the films made at the time by other groups?

DD If you got Cinema Action to come along, you got other films as well, like Rosie the Riveter

MD Did you see Nightcleaners?

DD Yes. That was going around and was played to large audiences of working class women in Doncaster.

MD That film could be quite surprising if you were expecting something more like Rosie the Riveter. How did your audience in Doncaster respond to it?

DD They responded very well.

MD They weren't worried by the repetition of certain images or the bits of black spacing?

DD No. But then again no one else was dealing with the subject. The very fact that it was being dealt with, on the screen in a debate situation was important. You were being presented with political questions about your own working life in the images of other workers. It wasn't expected that watching it would be like watching a cartoon.

There was a lot of interaction then with the professional film makers like Phillip Donnellan at the BBC who was making a series called Where do I stand. These were four films around particular individuals, and they did one with me.

MD At the time, if people like Donnellan were getting political programmes on tv, was there any reason for working outside as Cinema Action did?

DD I don't think they were trying to work on the outside. Some of their material did go on television. But you could wait for ever for the BBC to accept a film you were making whereas you needed the camera to be hot. It needed to be wild footage. You needed to be there on the spot. It wasn't a documentary you were trying to make. You weren't trying to record history. You were trying to make history. And it was set in a context as part of a debate - not entertainment, not an illustration, not a portrayal of the struggle - but part of the struggle.

The whole point of revolutionary film was to make the struggle. There's also a place for a documentary socio-historical piece and I use a lot of those films today, like the film about Grunwick. But essentially, the work that Cinema Action was doing was different. The films weren't meant to be there for ever, to win an Oscar. They were meant to be a tool in the struggle at the time.

MD Cinema Action changed in the late '70s towards making more reflective films which did begin to win prizes.

DD Yes, because the whole revolutionary movement was changing. We lost many people when the revolutionary time we thought was imminent started to retreat. The Agit Prop Bookshop closed down. In a sense, Cinema Action's change was part of that. The tide was starting to withdraw.

MD There was a certain revival of effort around the 1984 miners' strike which included the making of the Miners' Tapes. But Cinema Action didn't play a big part in that, did they?

DD No, but Chris Reeves, who co-ordinated the work, had trained with Cinema Action and some people from Cinema Action did bits of shooting. Some interviews were recorded at Cinema Action.

MD Ann said that when you were working with them she valued your political knowledge, your analytical understanding of a situation. Where had you acquired those skills?

DD My dad and my grandad had been trade union activists in the mining industry on Tyneside. It was a very cosmopolitan area next to South Shields where you had a massive influx of ships, foreign sailors, foreign influences, a tradition of political involvement in foreign causes from the Spanish Civil War on. My mother was from Kells, County Meath, in Ireland and some of her relatives had been active in the IRA.

MD That has to do with the politics but I was asking more about the intellectual approach.

DD I think that was the influence of anarchism in the city - free verse, poetry, the development of music in the city at the time, folk music and the rock music - not having a fear of poetry and art as I should have had.

MD Why should you have that fear?

DD Because it was considered middle class, soft. There was a generational in-put which took us away from narrow parochialism.

MD Did you do any formal academic study?

DD Yes, under Ralph Samuels with the History Workshop which published my work, Pit Life in County Durham.

MD I meant much earlier, in Newcastle, did you go to formal classes in politics or Marxism?

DD Only in the YCL. I joined the YCL when I was 14 but I was only in for about six months and was then expelled for being too Left.

We had been excluded from any intellectual practice at school. We were told we were thick and we'd failed the 11 plus. I was in a secondary modern in a C class which was the lowest and we were treated as thick proles. We were given a football to play with and I've hated football every since because we regarded it as collaboration. I got the cane every single day, generally once, sometimes three times, for wild extravagances like talking, looking defiant.

MD How was it that this didn't put you off anything connected with learning?

DD It was a matter of resistance. Knowing a different intellectualism was a defiance.

We used to have open air meetings in the middle of Newcastle and I used to go along and hear ship yard workers talking and it struck me that there was a way of using education as a weapon. I remember marching into the local library and asking for Capital and the librarian said, 'would that be Das Capital?' and got me down the three volumes in German. So, I sat there pretending to read it, nodding sagely!

MD Later on did you ever read it, in translation, all the way through?

DD I did.

Organisation of the Group

Schlacke

MD What did it mean to join Cinema Action - was there any kind of constitution?

SL We tried to have membership fees but we had no structure. So, there was an informality centred on the meetings. We had open meetings which were very difficult as students and political activists from various formations could all come. If someone was not run out of the meetings they were a member.

MD When people work intensely together there are often conflicts. Was this complicated for you by the fact that many of you were living as well as working together?

SL There were, of course, tensions and conflicts but the question of how you resolved them took place in a context of knowing that our opposition was very serious, that our achievements were only a dent. So we had a discipline of trying to ensure that conflict was not too intense. We were aware that what we were doing was very important so that you sometimes had to make compromises in terms of your principles.

Theory and Politics

Schlacke

SL The core of our strategy was to bring about better solidarisation - improved solidarisation of the disposessed.

MD How did you conceive of the relationship with the people you were filming?

SL For instance with Hands Off Student Unions, the student union approached us to make a film. The film was needed very soon and three autonomous groups were formed to shoot and edit different sections. But the important thing was how, during the making of the film, the editorial line of the three components emerged from discussions in the places where it was shot. The people whose activity was being filmed would decide what should be filmed. So it was very anti- authoritarian.

MD There was a rather ambivalent article about Cinema Action by David Glynn and Paul Marris in Afterimage which questions this anti-authoritarian approach ....

SL We were personally very critical of Glynn's article. They could never discern that there were intellectuals among Cinema Action. We followed Framework and Afterimage and understood their preoccupations. We had close relationship with French thought. Cahiers and the French post modernists were read here and debated. We were relating to movements in France and in Germany. We were developing notions of criticism in film language and supported the notion of critical reflection which was around, for instance, in the Screen project. Some people were intensely critical of Screen. We never were. We saw how important its contribution was.

MD In the context of those debates, how would you have described your work?

SL Our critical project was to work with audiences to counter political and academic simplifications. This means bringing about a discussion after the film - not having an abstract notion of discourse but implementing discourse.

With this work we could hear whether our films were working or not directly and this would be brought back into the film-making.

MD There are different meanings of 'working'. Did you want people to agree with the films or to argue with them?

SL The more intense the argument the better the show. Amongst our audiences you had not just progressive people but also people who were quite reactionary or brought reactionary ideas.

MD How did you relate to the established left groupings?

SL I made sure that there was never a projection of a particular party. For instance, if we were at a meeting organised by Trotskyist and I noticed that some C P people wanted to know what was going on I would bring them in.

I'm not against structures, I'm against structures excluding each other. It is totally idiotic when people who are in an impossibly weak situation, in terms of bargaining or negotiation, start rowing amongst themselves. I noticed that in France, you had about 50 revolutionary parties - fantastic! This is the recipe for letting the police run the show!

MD And what was your position in relation to the arguments within the independent sector, about the IFA, for instance.

SL There were, within the IFA, very few people who had that notion of pooling resources. The majority of IFA members were individualists. We knew that within an IFA context you could not articulate the demands of the collective.

MD Were your conclusions from that, that the IFA was not a useful organisation?

SL Oh no, it was crucial, IFA was not only a crucial organisation, it was us.
What was much more developed in the IFA was a cultural criticism and an onslaught on the inadequacy of the media industry.
Amber had a personal vendetta against the IFA which was a problem for us because we tried to point out that in this small contingent of 'aufrechters' - people who walk straight, who don't allow themselves to be bent by ideology nor by repression - you don't start artificial rows when it is more important to be united.

A resource and an influence.

Steve Sprung

SS As an organisation Cinema Action bumped into a big group of people, people who didn't necessarily adhere to their practice but passed through there or were encouraged. A lot of people I know who now work with film first came into either politics or film through Cinema Action. Lots of people came into contact with them and would be encouraged to try to make films, to see that's it's possible.

Schlacke

SL Nick Broomfield is an example. He finished his first film on our machine. Kwate, (Nii Kwate Owoo, now director of the Pan African Federation of Cineastes ed. ) who had been at the London Film School, made a film, You Hide Me, about the African Treasures in the British Museum, and edited it at Cinema Action - another no budget film!
Altogether there are about 250 or more people who are now in the industry who went through. For instance, Julien Temple who made Absolute Beginners.

MD Were you worried that some people who came to you were simply seeking entry to the industry?

SL. We were giving people a chance, that's all, a chance which is usually not there. Or if an organisation like the BFI does this work, they go about it in a bureaucratic way.

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Cinema Action. The Second Phase

This includes extracts from two accounts written at the end of 1996, one from Pascale Lamche, daughter of Ann and Schlacke, the other by Dennis Collum, a member from 1978. Pascale works in the French film industry. Dennis is a freelance cameraman and works with Platform Films.

'The Social Contract' and 'So That You Can Live'

Ann

AG For the Social Contract we went to a factory in South Wales. As we were leaving I overheard a shop steward saying to one of the other workers, 'Are you going over to give those women some support.' I asked what it was about and he said there was a strike by women about equal pay. I said, 'Let's go over!'

MD That was beginning of So That You Can Live?

AG From the start I was making a different film. I suggesed we should go home with the convener. It was something Cinema Action had never done before.

Pascale

The turning point came with the production of So That You Can Live. History had moved on and as film-makers, Cinema Action's analysis of how best to 'continue the struggle' was evolving. Cinema Action still lived and worked as a socialist collective.

So That You Can Live was made over a period of five years. This reflected a change in methodology with respect to how one can be most effective politically when one is working with film. The old forms of direct action, ie campaign films associated with particular trades-union or social struggles, had been appropriate for their time, but a more sophisticated and analytical approach now evolved which also began to take aesthetics and narrative evolution into consideration.

A Pilot Workshop

Schlacke

MD Eventually you had proper premises in Winchester Road with cuttings rooms and a small cinema. How did that happen?

SL For 10 years we were skipping from one squat to the next.

We were squatting a different building in Winchester road and we were under pressure to move out. As it was a council house, Camden couldn't just throw us on the street. So, together with the BFI, they agreed that somehow a modus should be found in which way we could continue and the modus was a pilot workshop.

Ann

AG Ken Livingstone was head of Camden Housing then and I asked him if he would come and look. I worked with a bureaucrat with Camden and wrote something and presented it to the full council. The full council agreed and gave us a grant to convert two new shops into a film centre. Almost simultaneously Ken Livingstone agreed that we should not be pushed out until the two new shops were ready.

Dennis Collum

I first became involved with Cinema Action during 1978 after meeting Schlacke at a screening of Class Struggle: Film from the Clyde. I had just left Leeds Polytechnic where I'd studied Fine Art but my time there had intensified key interests in film and politics.

At that time Cinema Action was housed in a squat at 35 Winchester Road in Swiss Cottage. However, eviction threatened as the whole terrace was due for rehabilitation by Camden Council. Developing the idea of 'integrated practice' alongside the existence of a remodelled 'film workshop' or 'film centre', Camden Council, The British Film Institute, and at a later stage, Channel 4 were successfully lobbied to provide financial support. After a year or so of painstaking negotiations and careful timetabling, Cinema Action was able to move out of no. 35 and into the newly built nos. 25 and 27 Winchester Road. After eighteen months or so,during 1982 Cinema Action relinquished no, 25 and took over the purpose built no 29.

Rocinante

Ann

A.G Rocinante was originally presented for funding to the BFI as a mixture of documentary and fiction. It was a development of the work we had done with So That You Can Live. There was one fictional character who later evolved into the John Hurt character. There was also a real family we were working with. The man was a forestry worker and that linked with the myth of the English countryside.

When we went to a meeting with the production board there was a feature producer who said, 'What's the matter? Are you scared to do a feature?' We explained that we weren't in the least bit scared of fiction but that we specifically wanted the mixture, that we were interested in the question of what is fiction and what is documentary. But the Board took the position that it should either be fiction or documentary and while we were arguing with them the circumstances of the family changed.

It was unfortunate that we had to change our plan and I think it affected the whole direction of Cinema Action. But Rocinante was made completely in the context of our normal working methods. Every idea, every bit of script went through the mill of collective discussion.

The mid '80s

Pascale

One must never forget that Cinema Action was a political group (came into existence as such and continued to identify itself almost conceptually as such, much like the Bauhaus defined a sensibility and a design aesthetic that was deeply political - and remember that Ann and Schlacke were trained at Ulm), one which defined its politics independently of all political parties. Schlacke was the political philosopher; Ann was the energetic organiser, the trade-unionist and the generator of most ideas; Eduardo was the professional film-maker. These three people constituted the core group.

Dennis

The Channel 4 workshop money paid the market rent for the new premises and allowed the pool of labour to be expanded. The wage element (ACTT/Channel 4 agreed rate x 4) was pooled and divided among the workshop members.

In the distribution area there was still a great deal of interest - political and theoretical - in Cinema Action's earlier black and white films of the '70s and these were still being shown regularly at trade union conferences, media studies courses, regional film theatres etc.

The cinema was difficult to make work as a commercial proposition as programming was very much a hit and miss affair. Sometimes queues would stretch round the block to see films, especially ones that were connected to specific political campaign or movement, eg. Nicaragua. At other times screenings would not be so successful in terms of audience numbers.

Pascale

The younger generation of Cinema Action members spent most of their time running and organising the film centre. Individual projects were researched and written and received some interest from Channel 4's Alan Fountain who would have liked to encourage the emergence of production ideas from the younger members. More Bass, an experimental fiction about music was made by them (directed by Tag Lamche) and was well received by Rod Stoneman although never transmitted as certain editorial changes suggested by Channel 4 led to a collapse in confidence by the film-maker. This interest in film forms (fiction) and music was also reflected in Sister Suzi Cinema, an acappella opera which was shot and produced by Schlacke but then fell into rights difficulties. Cinema Action was learning about practices in the commercial world. - collective work was difficult to maintain.

Schlacke

Amber is brilliant because they at the same time can run a pub. I think that's something we were always short of in Cinema Action - someone who can also run a pub.

The late '80s/early '90s

Pascale

The group began to drift apart as individuals members sought their own individual ways and production. This was partly economic - it became difficult to sustain a living organising facilities for other film-makers; partly political - it was difficult to retain a coherent political core around a younger generation that were keen to find their way as film producers, writers, cameramen or actresses rather than militants, and around forms of production that required an entirely different set of priorities (ie feature films require identifiable director, good marketing and exhibition strategies etc.) partly personal - Ann and Eduardo had by now moved to Portugal and were increasingly interested in feature film making.

Cinema Action continued as a facility for independent film makers on a skeleton staff and with dwindling means.

Dennis

Alan Fountain's workshop money dried up and the last BFI cheque arrived in 1990. Everybody had left apart from Schlacke and myself. For the next three years we struggled, in the face of the general recession, to keep the doors of Cinema Action open until June 1993 when Camden Council appointed bailiffs arrived to nail the doors of 27 and 29 Winchester Road.

Pascale

Had it ever been an enterprise run along capitalist lines rather than as socialist collective which eschewed all forms of accumulation for individual gain or security, it would have survived and devolved into a production company and facilities house. But Cinema Action's (Schlacke's) politics were too uncompromising in the face of Thatcher's savage onslaught on Britain.