

STREET VIDEO

Street Video is about community video activity in the UK using relatively low-cost, portable video technology. It aims to give a picture of why and how small bands of people all over the country — mostly on very low incomes — have decided to use this medium to fight for a wide range of radical causes. Its main focus is the people who use video and the subjects they choose to make video tapes about — it is not a technical handbook.

As power — and particularly the power of communication — becomes vested in fewer and fewer hands, so the ability of people to speak to each other about issues which concern them grows smaller. If you cannot communicate effectively then you become powerless to influence events — to organise and protest.

Community video, along with other community media such as newspapers and photography, is an attempt to reverse that trend. All of those media stand for genuine communication between people. Unless care and thought is given to their development most people may end up without any voice at all.

The author is a freelance journalist based in London. He is co-author with Heinz Nigg of a study called *Community Media* — described by Peter Fiddick in the *Guardian* as "an eminently undogmatic, thoughtful comment and very helpful account of how six British community media groups have approached their work."

£1.80 ISBN 0 907340 00 8

Blackthorn Press

STREET VIDEO

Graham Wade

Blackthorn Press

STREET VIDEO

GRAHAM WADE



AN ACCOUNT OF
FIVE VIDEO GROUPS

Chapter 6

Manchester Film and Video Workshop

This workshop is unlike the rest in that it has developed from a predominantly film base. However, a good deal of its present work is with video. This change of emphasis has come about through financial and technical pressures combining to make it cheaper and easier to use video than film.

John Crumpton, who has remained workshop organiser since its formation in 1977, traces its origins back to the Independent Film Makers Association set up in the mid-1970s. A number of individuals in the Manchester area, including members of the IFA, were frustrated by the lack of opportunities and facilities for those wanting to make non-commercial films.

At about the same time, the film panel of North West Arts, the regional arts association, were formulating a long term policy which, it was hoped, would eventually give Manchester its own regional film centre. It seemed the two needs related to one another and so it was decided to set up a workshop as a first step to realising the film centre idea, which still required considerable amounts of cash from the British Film Institute to make it possible in its entirety.

Because there was not a vast amount of money available for creating the workshop it was initially decided to concentrate on super-8 film and video equipment. A limited amount of 16mm film gear was also available. In 1977, soon after it was established by North West Arts' film panel, the workshop moved into far from ideal premises near Manchester city centre.

The building is an old mill, built last century, and reached down a narrow cobbled road which comes to an abrupt dead-end. At first the space was shared with a printing group, but they moved out leaving the workshop with two floors to work in. At present the ground floor has the general office, where all four workers have their desks, a small hall, used for meetings, film projection, video screenings and

shooting, and a small room for 8mm and 16mm film editing. The basement contains an area for video editing and darkroom space for still photography.

In practice the workshop functions in a similar manner to most others in the field. It aims to provide access to media facilities for individuals and groups who otherwise would find it difficult or impossible to lay their hands on any. However, in the theoretical framework devised by the funding film panel this point appears: "That priority be given to film makers/groups who wish to seriously engage with the problems and practices of film and video as media in their own right, as opposed to using those media in an uncritical way as simply transparent vehicles for the transmission of some predetermined information."

Here the accent is clearly placed on creative uses as distinct from community ones — an attitude which one might expect from a film panel of an arts association. The brief history of the workshop has shown that there are minor conflicts between the film panel's views and those of the workshop staff — differences which will be considered later.

Dissatisfaction

John Crumpton landed the job of workshop organiser largely out of dissatisfaction with what he had been doing before. He'd been a local government clerk, worked in theatre and as an assistant film editor — all after completing art college. Specifically he wanted to be able to make his own films and help others in the same position.

As the workshop grew — there was no shortage of people ringing up to borrow film projectors, portapacks and wanting to learn how to use them — it became clear that more workers were needed. First to be taken on, after a long period doing the job voluntarily, was Greg Dropkin, an American from Chicago who came to this country to study mathematics. He has been on the payroll since mid-1978.

He states his own position unambiguously: "If I had the money I would make films. But I don't, so I make video tapes instead." He sees the workshop as officially having two purposes: to provide equipment for independent film and video producers and to provide technical support and training for community groups — "with not much emphasis on what the final product looks like." The first purpose

derives from the initial and continuing film panel money. The second from subsequent money from the community arts panel.

He describes his own motivation for working there as being mainly political. "I want to make films like the Other Cinema in London distributes — political documentaries about what is going on around me. If I couldn't do that on video tape then I'd try to do it by writing. I'm not trying to make 'my' films. In work I've done there have been a lot of people involved at different levels. I'm not concerned to override what other people may want — although I'll put my point of view."

He draws a broad distinction between long and short term projects. His own clear preference is for the longer term ones "which are done slowly and carefully with a good deal of background reading and discussion." The briefer type of work — "where people call in and want a result in three days" — doesn't particularly appeal to Greg Dropkin, with a few exceptions.

One of these exceptions is an occasional session with a group of mentally handicapped young people in their late teens and 20s. "They usually come to the workshop at a day's notice and want to make something immediately. It's very exciting for them. Once they've shot their video tape nothing else is done except replay it. I enjoy that, but I don't particularly like constantly showing someone how to plug a portapack in."

Roughly half Greg Dropkin's work is on long term projects, the rest is divided between one-off activities and printing photographs in the workshop's darkroom. A considerable amount of time is spent on a variety of groups wishing to screen both their own and other people's material. For the year 1978/79 the workshop drew up a list of all the groups which had used their facilities. It totalled 107 organisations. Under the heading community groups appeared 23 names, including the Daisy Bank Day Centre and North Manchester Women's Aid. Under cultural/leisure organisations were 44 entries, including Cheetham Adventure Playground, Rochdale Film Society and Rabid Records.

There were 17 entries under educational agencies, including Manchester Free School, several university and polytechnic groups and further education departments. Ethnic minority groups clocked up nine entries, including George Jackson House and the Shanti Third World Centre. Five statutory organisations are listed, including Moss Side Child Guidance Clinic and Eccles Probation Service.

Finally, under others, appeared nine groups, including the Anti-Nazi League and the Radical Media Conference.

The other workers

In addition to John Crumpton and Greg Dropkin there are two other full-time workers. Bob Jones, like John, comes from an art college background. He became interested in video when portapacks first appeared in the UK around 1969. After leaving college he took a string of jobs including one working in Granada TV's film library. In the mid-1970s he met others in Manchester — Greg Dropkin among them — who wanted to pursue their own style of committed independent film making, and was subsequently involved in the setting up of the workshop. He became a part-time paid worker in early 1979 and went full-time in June that year.

He has worked on a range of video projects, but still feels he has yet to find a method of working which completely satisfies him. He is critical of the workshop's role which he feels is sometimes little more than being "an audio-visual warehouse". Like Greg Dropkin he would prefer to spend his time working for a long period with a group of adults — but he hasn't achieved this. He dislikes the town centre position which the workshop occupies and believes a small base in an outlying neighbourhood might be more productive for the kind of activity he wishes to develop.

The fourth full-time worker, Peter Bainbridge, worked as a bank clerk after leaving school. After more white collar jobs he took some A-levels at a college and then a degree in politics at Hull University. This was followed by a period working in a factory and a brief course on community arts at Manchester polytechnic. He sees himself working within the general context of community arts which he summarises as "finding a way to help people organise themselves."

He works over a very broad front which takes in training and production in video, still photography and super-8 film making as well as a number of routine jobs like answering the phone and ordering supplies. Most of his activity is with young people. Some of these film and video projects involve related arts activities such as drama, set building, making masks and so on. Others take a local event such as a carnival as the springboard for a production and some are concerned with immediate issues such as unemployment.

The main emphasis of his work leans towards helping groups

organise themselves and providing basic equipment training as part of an overall project. He places less emphasis on finished products particularly for groups who are new to film and video tape making. However, he does believe in groups developing their practical skills so they can achieve more polished products which in turn will win wider appeal.

There is also a part-time helper, Wayne, who clears up around the workshop. He recently left school and is unemployed. His presence has enabled him to learn about film animation. He also uses the premises as a free practice hall for his rock band.

The gear

Manchester Film and Video Workshop has the largest array of equipment of any group examined in this study. On the video side there are two black and white portapacks, associated mains edit decks, a pair of old black and white studio cameras (which can be linked with the portapack cameras to provide multi-camera coverage of an event), TV sets and two home video cassette recorders.

For 16mm film activities there are a pair of projectors, a Bolex camera and quite sophisticated editing machines. For super-8 film there is a projector, two cameras (including sound recording) and editing facilities. For still photography there is a 35mm camera and darkroom facilities for processing and printing. There is shared equipment between media such as lighting, screens, microphones, audio recorders and so on.

Like other groups the workshop has three scales of hire charges for these facilities. The first for people without grants, the second for people with them and the third for "commercial and higher educational bodies." The highest charge is £15 a day for hiring a portapack at the commercial rate. At the lower community rate this drops to £3 a day.

Yet it would be wrong to leave the impression that the workshop is well-equipped or that the workers think it is. Although it may have more facilities than most other resource centres of its type, there is still a lot of room for improvement. Much of the equipment is old — none of the video gear can make original tapes in colour for instance. On top of this the physical state of the premises is such that efficient work becomes even more difficult. A few days spent in the workshop with people popping in and out, the phone continually ringing,

equipment having to be transported from one place to another, training sessions having to be arranged and so on, would convince anyone that the workshop manages to carry out a more than satisfactory job against quite impossible odds.

Even more miraculous is that so much considered production — requiring the active participation of workshop members through many or all of its stages — actually takes place. One of the most time-consuming video tapes yet made using the workshop's facilities and expertise took as its subject the position of Chilean refugees in Britain.

The Chile tape

Both Greg Dropkin and Bob Jones independently of each other had the idea, in 1978, of producing something about Chilean exiles who were forced to leave their country after the military coup had destroyed the democratically elected government of Popular Unity there led by Allende. Greg Dropkin already knew one of the refugees in Manchester — Jaime Cortez — and through him arranged a meeting to consider the idea with several Chileans.

The group which he assembled were all associated with one Chilean political party, the MIR (Movement of the Revolutionary Left). It was generally agreed that a video tape should be made, but that the tape's perspective should be a broad one so that it could appeal to a wide audience. In other words the tape was not to confine itself exclusively to the MIR political tendency.

But the MIR predominance in the steering group offended other Chilean political groups and they decided they didn't want to take part. A letter asking for help was written in Spanish and sent to all known Chileans in Manchester and not a single response was forthcoming — except from MIR members. So the project got off to an unfortunately sectarian start, yet as it progressed its broad character became apparent and many non-MIR Chileans became involved. In the end, of all refugees interviewed on video tape, not one was a MIR member.

Basically the MIR is a marxist-leninist party which, before 1970, carried on a great deal of its work outside the traditional areas of trade union industrial activity. Instead it directed much of its energy to the slums and minority groups such as the Mapuche Indians. It was in conflict with the Allende government because it had to take direct

action to win help for those sections of society it worked in. There were also other, more profound political differences.

While the MIR broadly supported the Allende government, it regarded the period of Popular Unity as a breathing space during which left-wing activity should develop and expand. They did not regard the Allende government as a solution to Chile's problems in itself, but as a stepping stone in that direction. The Chilean Communist Party felt that the Allende government fell because it was trying to introduce change too fast. The MIR Party and other left groups believed the opposite — that US intervention could be foreseen and should have been prepared for.

During the initial discussions on what should be included in the video tape several basic ideas surfaced. One was to counter the myth that a group of poor refugees from the third world had been generously welcomed by a civilised and liberal British society. As Greg Dropkin explains: "The real situation was that a number of refugees were admitted and they then had to face all the problems of the dole, housing, health service and so on. Most of them couldn't speak English and had a very bad time settling down."

Another proposed aim was to give information about what had happened in Chile since the military coup as well as some account of life during Popular Unity. It was felt that interest in the Chile issue had become rather dampened after Allende's overthrow and that more recent information might help to rekindle interest.

Jaime Cortez describes a further area that they wanted to tackle: "Britain is supposed to be a developed country and Chile an under-developed one. But at certain levels it is vice versa. Because we in Chile are a poor country the level of mobilisation, the consciousness of the people is higher in the third world than it is in Britain."

"We had a special view of Europe from books and films — but that only showed the world of the upper classes. It came as a shock to a lot of us that Europe also has its poverty and exploitation. For instance, there is relatively little racism in Latin America, so to come to a country where you are made to feel inferior because of your skin colour is very strange and shocking."

"For women in Chile children's nurseries were common — to find they are rare in a civilised society also comes as a shock. So we wanted to make a video tape about why these refugees were here, what forced them to leave Chile, and how they see their lives here. As I see it we are aiming at an audience generally in the solidarity

movement, those who are fairly knowledgeable about politics with an humanitarian concern. It would also be useful to Chileans just arriving here."

Greg Dropkin admits his preferred audience for the tape was trade union groups. There was some debate on whether the tape should appeal primarily to a British or Chilean audience and it was agreed to go for a the British one — so the tape is in English. As the discussions lengthened and interest grew, so the scope of the project expanded. Eventually it was agreed that the final tape should run for 90 minutes in three sections.

Production problems

An undertaking of such vast proportions did not pass without its share of problems. Early on a Chilean using the camera at a demonstration accidentally pointed it at the sun irreversibly scarring the tube — which meant a small dark squiggle appeared in the middle of all the pictures shot on that camera afterwards. After six months of gathering material (the project began in the spring of 1978) there was a distinct lack of dramatic tape sequences. Luckily, this was overcome by a weekend's recording at a reception centre in London where most Latin American refugees are sent on arrival in this country.

There were also severe hold-ups on translation work. But eventually this difficulty was overcome. At the time of writing, the first 30-minute section has been completed, and the editing and dubbing of the other two are well advanced. So far the project has received just one grant of £100 from North West Arts to cover the expenses of the London taping. All the rest of the costs have come out of the workshop's general fund. A further grant may be sought to pay for a 16mm film copy of the completed tape to widen its chances of exhibition.

The opening section of the Chile tape proves that all of the time and energy which has gone into the project has been worthwhile. There are technical imperfections, but these are relatively minor irritations. The tape manages to build up a solid picture of what it is like to be a refugee arriving in Britain — and the first hurdle comes immediately with immigration control at Heathrow. As one person comments: "Some immigration officers are obviously unsympathetic to immigrants of any sort, but particularly to refugees." The medical checks and questions are all humiliating.

The interviews conducted at the London reception centre — an hotel in Notting Hill — are riveting. Accounts of close relatives being taken from their homes by the Chilean secret police to be tortured to death are appalling. Two former copper processing workers, now living in Manchester, recall the days before the success of Popular Unity: "There was exploitation by the multi-nationals — they took the raw materials, but left disease and poverty."

There are several minutes of film taken from a movie made by Popular Unity supporters in Chile itself. A sequence of a bus ride in Chile is intercut with one video taped from the top of a Manchester double-decker — the two worlds collide on the screen. The Chile Solidarity Campaign helped at various stages of the production. The basic team was made up of Greg Dropkin and half-a-dozen Chileans living in Manchester, which has a Chilean community of about 250. It is hoped the tape will be shown outside the north west region.

Immigration

Another long-term project, which began more recently in autumn 1979, concerns immigration. Greg Dropkin believes this subject "is more hopeful because the left has started to take up immigration and deportation, whereas Chile is no longer a big issue." The idea of making a video tape on this theme developed from two people who came to the workshop to see another tape — a Granada TV film recorded off-air — which dealt with the attempted deportation of Abdul Azad of Oldham.

Although the Granada film was good by broadcast television standards it limited itself to the one case and did not deal with deportations in general or the position immigrant workers find themselves in. So the two people who came to see the Azad programme — one was a community advice worker, the other a Bengali law centre worker — decided with Greg Dropkin, Bob Jones and Peter Bainbridge to try to make a more detailed tape. Several other people turned up to the first three meetings to discuss how the tape should be made.

So far these discussions have mainly revolved around the two key questions of content and audience. There have been differences over how much time should be given to an historical account of racism and how much to relating the problems of immigrant workers in this country to similar guest-workers in other west European states.

Parallel to these ideological arguments, research tasks — on the various immigration laws, particular deportation cases and interviewing individuals — are defined and given to people to carry out as quickly as possible. In the meantime there are a number of current campaigns underway to fight deportation proceedings against black immigrants in the region and arrangements are made for portapacks to cover as many demonstrations as possible.

A picket of the immigration appeals office in Manchester to support Pakistani Nasira Begum was covered by Greg Dropkin and Bob Jones from the workshop with a portapack to build up this kind of material. The 50 or so people on the demonstration mostly know of the film and video workshop already and are more than willing to cooperate and be interviewed.

Contacts with other groups who have experience of immigration issues — like the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants — are put in hand. Someone else tries to follow up the Thames TV series *Our People*, so that extracts may be used in the new video tape. In a similar way to the Chile tape an intensive programme of discussion and research is launched to produce what is hoped will become a comprehensive, informed and watchable video tape which will make a significant and unique contribution to campaigns fighting existing and proposed repressive immigration laws.

Commitment

In the final analysis the Chile tapes, the immigration tapes, and the dozens of other video tapes made by Manchester film and video workshop in conjunction with all sorts of groups, organisations and individuals, depend on the degree of commitment given them by the workshop's workers. The massive undertaking of the Chile project only struggled through its complicated and lengthy stages because Greg Dropkin wasn't prepared to see it fail.

At the beginning of the project he wasn't able to speak a word of Spanish. Almost at its end he can conduct a basic interview in Spanish. This is not to undervalue the contribution of those Chilean refugees who participated in the production, but it does underline the deep commitment of the video worker who saw it through.

This process of struggle and perseverance — repeated in other community media projects all over the country — goes on in a context of limited resources, technical breakdowns and extreme pressures on

time and energy from the competing demands of other campaigns and pressure groups.

Yet despite this and other displays of sheer hard work, bodies like the Manchester workshop are consistently underfinanced. It is a matter worth thinking about — and one which will be considered at the end of this study — but, for the moment, let us examine where the workshop derives its income.

Funding

As mentioned earlier, the workshop grew out of plans for a film centre conceived by the film panel of the North West Arts Association — the regional organisation of the Arts Council of Great Britain. The major share of the workshop's finances have come always from the film panel — they have paid the co-ordinator's salary (John Crumpton), bought most of the equipment and footed the bill for the general running costs. However, since early 1979, when the workshop's staff began to expand — first by one part-timer and eventually by three more (Greg Dropkin, Bob Jones and Peter Bainbridge) — the community arts panel of North West Arts Association has also contributed money to pay these workers.

This new source of income has brought to the fore some of the tensions surrounding funding for groups such as the film and video workshop. In an application for money to the community arts panel submitted by Greg Dropkin and Bob Jones in late 1978, these observations appear from Bob Jones: "Whilst I welcome the interest shown in our application . . . I was worried by certain attitudes made clear in the questions asked by the community arts officer and a panel member.

"I feel the emphasis placed on pure training work betrays a lack of understanding of how much work is involved in working with a group and helping them produce a film, tape or newspaper that best expresses what they want to say . . . We do not see our future as *just* teachers of basic operational skills to hundreds of community workers. It is not due to our personal whims that groups like the Chileans or the literacy group become involved in the workshop. It is because there are people around who understand from a practical point of view the value of access to 'alternative' media."

This passage underlines the kind of pressure, however slight, which can be exerted by a funding source. The implication is that the

community arts panel wanted to see an emphasis on training a large number of people in the technical operation of media, rather than pursuing long term projects. It is also made clear in this application that some of the workshop staff (at that point in time they were in fact voluntary workers) felt that the community arts panel didn't want them to carry out political work.

A specific criticism was levelled by the community arts panel at a video tape made by the workshop in conjunction with some council tenants living in Moss Side. In the same application Greg Dropkin notes: "I am a little disappointed that some panel members did not feel that the Moss Side tape was community arts . . . People may disagree with its political position . . . but it was certainly a tape made as far as possible with a group of people whose experience of the established media has been entirely negative. Some panel members expressed the opinion that we manipulated the interviews. This suggests a lack of awareness of the real depth of feeling among the tenants of Moss Side. No one could put words into the mouths of these people, who are simply speaking from their own experience. Certainly the tenants do not speak in terms of sociology or economics, but it would be completely blind to pretend that politics and political awareness are not part of the tenants' everyday life."

Is it art?

The workshop is also subject to pressure — pulling in a different direction — from the film panel. In another document, written by the film officer, this appears: "There seems to me a possible tension between the declared aims of the film panel in the sphere of film/video production and the direction the workshop has been taking over the last year (1978/9). This tension has been heightened to some extent by community arts panel (funding). The distinction between the respective areas has been recently outlined in the film panel's revised production guidelines:

"The panel is unwilling to support projects which are primarily extensions of social and community work, in which the final film or video tape is of secondary importance to the process and experience of group work. The community arts panel of North West Arts will consider such applications . . ."

In other words the film panel is more concerned that the workshop should undertake projects which produce more considered

end results — results which, to quote another film panel document, “engage with the problems and practices of film and video as media in their own right, as opposed to using those media in an uncritical way as simply transparent vehicles for the transmission of some predetermined information.” As stated at the beginning of this chapter, this view of the film panel underlines a creative and theoretical approach.

But these two attitudes — of the film and community arts panels — both fail to appreciate the feelings of the workshop staff as a whole. Significantly both views implicitly shy away from any overt political involvement on the part of the workshop or the groups it works with. So in a real sense the workshop finds itself going against the wishes — often expressed in a round about way — of both its paymasters.

Because the funding of the workshop is split between two panels of North West Arts, and has not been given systematically, the workshop's development, particularly on the equipment level, has been haphazard. However, as Bob Jones points out, this has had its advantages. Because few members of either panel have bothered to find out in any detail what the workshop is actually doing on a day to day basis, a degree of freedom has resulted.

Greg Dropkin takes a more cynical view. Asked whether he felt there was a built-in conflict between relying on arts association money for his own preferred projects — such as the Chile and immigration tapes — he says: “I don't make any claims to be either creative or artistic. I'm sure they don't enjoy funding me and at some point will cut me off.”

The workshop co-ordinator, John Crumpton, is more philosophical. “It's the classic case — you always angle a particular funding application to the body you're applying to. It's difficult to generalise on the overall nature of the work we're doing when each project has its own identity. Basically we're trying to encourage people to make films and video tapes and we're trying to find audiences for those products — audiences which will give something back after a presentation.”

John Crumpton sums up his own motivation, which serves to speak for the workshop as a whole, by saying: “I like working with people on an equal basis. Even if a video tape which has taken hours to make only gets shown to 50 people — then that's better than attracting a huge audience with a product that's compromised. It's only worthwhile if the tape is made on the terms of those people

directly involved. If you haven't got your heart and your head in the right place then you're lost. All you can do is what you feel is right and just hope you make steady progress. I know that the barricades are not going to go up in the streets tomorrow.

“We work on a different basis to television, which regards interviewees as camera fodder, ripe for distortion and exploitation. There is normally no discussion or consultation with people used by the established media. We work jointly with groups towards a mutually agreed production, at the same time trying to break down the myth and élitism of media technology.”

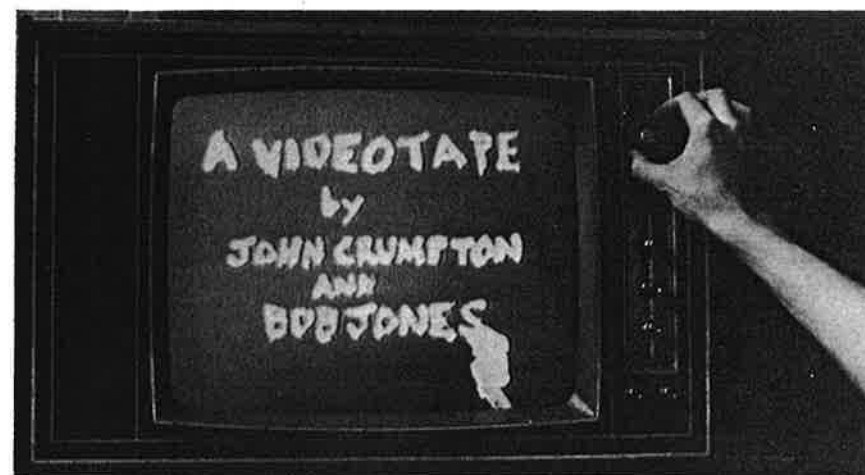


Glasgow: a speaker at a national Claimants' Union conference



Glasgow: Castlemilk's local social security office

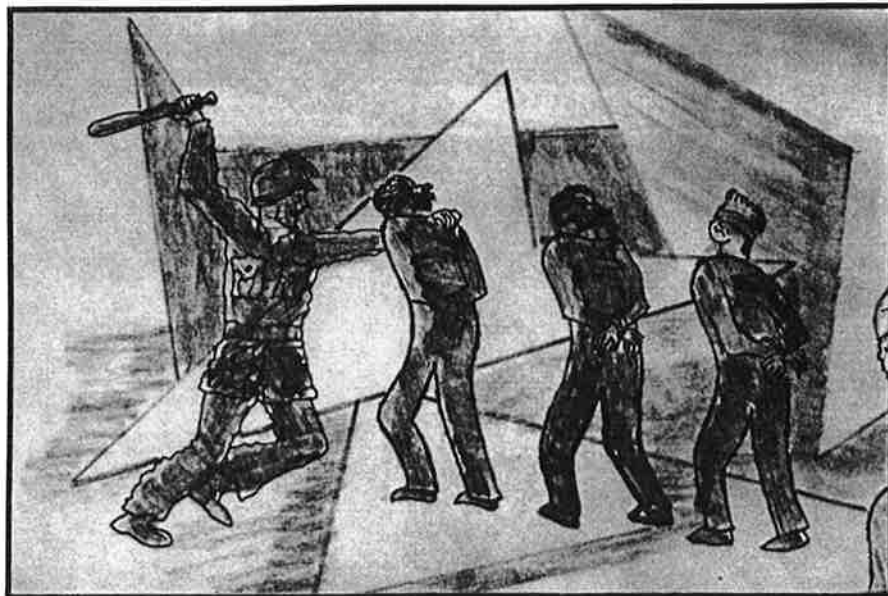
Manchester: John Crumpton with children on Hulme council estate



Manchester: a video tape credit



Manchester: a Chilean exile's drawing used in the Chile tapes



Manchester: Bob Jones tapes a demonstration at the Immigration Office

