

SO YOU WANT TO BE A COLLECTIVE or  
LET'S TIE OUR SHOELACE

Word is Out was made more or less collectively. I say more or less because everyone did not have equal responsibility for doing everything all the time. None-the-less, I think that we were, indeed, a collective (more or less).

Actually, while making the film we always avoided the word. We started out with me holding the title of Director, and everyone else essentially titleless (commoners). In about the middle of the process we came to the conclusion that this was not the way we wanted to work, and that it did not reflect accurately the way we were often working, so we decided that there would be no hierarchy (some people would call this a coup-d'etat). After the film was finished, and realizing that we needed a name, we decided to call ourselves the Mariposa Film Group. We were, as Rob put it in a press interview, a collective in retrospect. Anyway, whatever labels we use to describe our operating methods, I think that it worked: we made a film together which we are all proud of, which says things that each of us, as individuals, felt it was important to say, and no one felt exploited in the process.

I am not really sure if there is a single definition or model for working collectively, but it is obvious that the system is based upon equality between the members -- equality (hopefully) in a number of different ways: equality of ownership, equality of responsibility, equality of the opportunity for input.

When the method works the advantages are obvious. Not only is an atmosphere created whereby individuals can grow stronger because they have real responsibilities and because their interpersonal relationships are based upon honesty rather than hierarchy, but a very powerful product can result when a collective consciousness is tapped. The advantages are obvious, but I would like to stress that I do not think that this is the only good way to work. In the first place, the method is clearly inappropriate for some kinds of projects. And secondly, even for those projects like Word is Out, which can clearly benefit from group production, there are real disadvantages and pitfalls. Management by committee can be a disaster, a disaster in two ways: It is often monstrously inefficient, and sometimes it can actually stifle creativity.

Any system of human organization (simply because it is a system) can become dehumanizing. If the maintenance of the system itself, by strict adherence to its rules and rhetoric, supersedes human needs, or the achieving of the goals for which it was formed, then it is no longer useful. No rigid system should ever be a substitute for taking on personal responsibilities, for clear-headed thinking, for honesty, or for respect for and love of each other. This sounds obvious but I think that for us, raised

in a hierarchy and usually so inexperienced in working cooperatively, it is easy to adopt wholesale a naive and simplistic version of working collectively in the name of right-on-ness, and this can be just as destructive as what we are running away from. New collectives, in an effort to be pure, will often attempt to make practically all decisions and do all the work together.

In the Mariposa Film Group, whenever this situation got absurd someone would bring up the analogy of trying to build a house collectively (Maybe a People's Medical Center?). Now in this situation the one and only way that we would know that all decisions, all work, were being done collectively would be if all six of us would go over and grab a brick, carry it, and place it together on the wall. (This, of course, providing there was agreement on where to place it, and if not we would have to have a meeting and arrive at a consensus). The point is obvious -- if anything is going to get accomplished, the group is going to have to distribute tasks and responsibilities. ("You pick up the brick and I'll put it down." "No, I'll pick it up and ....."). The problem becomes how to divide responsibilities. This task would be difficult enough in constructing a building -- given the usual inequities of experience, willingness to do the dirty work, etc. -- but the process is particularly critical when a product such as a movie is involved, which often requires an unusually high degree of original problem-solving and creative thinking. This process of human creativity is so delicate that it can be destroyed by the sheer clumsiness of a group.

So, if the initial tendency is to do everything together, but both efficiency and creativity require division of labor, one of the first skills a group must master is how to decide what work is best done by the group, and what work should be assigned. In the first place, tasks which do not require a high degree of decision-making should, as often as possible, be done by individuals, unless, naturally, the nature of the task requires a lot of bodies. The problem becomes a little more difficult when the creative process or decision making is involved.

I see the creative process as divisible into two fairly distinct, but equally important, categories which I refer to as active thinking and reactive thinking. Reactive thinking is the easier of the two. If active thinking is writing, reactive thinking is rewriting. It is basically making creative choices. (Should a square or a rectangular window go here? Should we use the take where the camera wiggles or the one with the flare?). Active thinking is where there are no clear choices -- the kind where you have to arrive at what these choices (or sometimes the choice) will be. The active process, for me, is the really scary part of making a movie or writing a script -- or doing anything really creative. Unfortunately, this process is the most mysterious of human activity. It is also the scariest, most difficult, most painful, and the most easily undermined. And since I personally will do anything to put it off (I promise that I will sit down and write out that scene just as soon as I have cleaned behind the bath tub and have another cup of coffee) or avoid it, I will certainly welcome the cooperation of a group to help me thwart the process. (Yes, let's all sit down together and cut this scene. You push the forward button, and I the reverse.)

Both components of creative work are essential and I believe that both always go into any kind of truly creative endeavor which has made life worth living, whether it be a Bach concerto or a revolutionary historical analysis.

The problem in doing creative work as a group is that this procedure is appropriate only for reactive thinking, whereas the environment most conducive to active thinking is solitude -- solitude for two reasons. The first being that the process, for me at least, involves allowing my unconscious to percolate for a while, which means I have to free myself from conscious, rational thought patterns. This process of encouraging the irrational, nonverbal side is absolutely antithetical to group-work situations where ideas have to be made rational, if for no other reason than to be expressed and defended to the other members. The second reason is that the very essence of original thinking involves great risk-taking, risks so great you can barely trust yourself in your own company. We all, in one way or another, have spent our lives being told that we are dumb and worthless, and the one sure way to avoid proving it to ourselves is never to do anything. Suppose you write your brilliant story down and it sounds stupid to you, at least if you are working alone you can figure on keeping this new-found proof of your ignorance a secret.

So how does all this theory apply to working collectively? In this area I have found a system which worked well for us. The group should try and limit itself to reactive thinking and avoid active thinking by assigning this work to different individuals from the group. For example, in my experience, it is usually a disaster for several people to sit around and write something from scratch -- say a narration. What works much better is for the group to discuss what purpose the narration is to serve, and perhaps other guidelines such as style, content, length -- whatever, and then assign the job to someone in the group, hopefully, if things are working well, to the person who is most able to do the job. A draft of the work is then brought in for criticism. It is at this point that reactive thinking and group work are so effective and so powerful, because it is here that the different perspectives of age, sex, class and just individual experience are so valuable. The work should be criticized in as constructive, but totally honest way as possible. It can then either be revised by the group or be taken away with the new mandate (by the original person or someone else) and reworked for a second round. Because having something you worked on so hard being criticized by a group can be so painful, sometimes it is useful to go (with rough versions) to individual members initially, to get criticism on a one-to-one basis first, before presenting it to everybody (some people refer to this process as lobbying).

It might be valuable here to give an example of how the Mariposa Film Group, in our editing process, used this technique of dividing creative work into active thinking and reactive. Most of our footage involved people telling their life stories to the camera. We had shot an average of an hour on each person and had to edit it down to about ten minutes. Each interview was transcribed in full and six copies were made. We then screened the rushes together, without discussion, and everybody made their comments in the margin of their copy -- marks for parts they liked, parts they hated, parts they couldn't live without, etc. The notes were then transferred in six different colors (were we ever organized) on to one transcript. Then one of the members of the group (eventually four of us were actively involved in the day to day editing of the picture) would try to cut a coherent portrait of an interviewee, aiming at a length of about ten minutes, and using the marked transcript as a guide. It was at this stage of the editing that our process first became really critical, because it was essential that these mini-portraits be coherent, that each one work as a whole. The process of editing in any film is difficult and painful

enough because it essentially involves giving up your favorite material for that which works for the whole. It is impossible if six people have to give up their favorites. The only way that you can give it up is that the whole is actually worth it. Therefore when the rough cut of the mini-portrait was screened, if it was fairly integrated it became relatively easy for members to give up material. If the piece did not work, or if there was something left out which one member felt essential, the original editor would take it back and try again.

The most important element in this process is, of course, trust. Trust that the person doing the work will do a good job; trust that the group will not trash you if they think you didn't do a good job. A couple of things can happen if there is a real atmosphere of trust and shared purpose. One is that a member can feel safe enough to say, "I have this idea for the way this scene should be cut, but it is unformed and I can't explain it to you, so trust me to go off and work on it by myself before presenting it to the group." And the other is that there can be so little need for individual "ownership" in the aspects of the work assigned that all boundaries become diffused. Some of the times I remember most fondly from Word is Out were when one editor had been cutting a scene -- maybe all night -- and would show it to someone else -- just coming back to work -- who would then simply sit down and continue cutting it, or start recutting it. In other words, we often got to a place where everyone felt enough personal confidence and support so that a criticism or reworking of their work was not threatening.

Unfortunately, this was not always the case, and of course we spent innumerable hours haggling -- sometimes over interpersonal problems, sometimes on differing matters of opinion regarding an aspect of the film itself. (In retrospect these often may have been somewhat interdependent). Unfortunately, working in a group can, at times, exaggerate an individual's worst faults. Group decision and the dynamics of heated and heartfelt discussions can encourage those of us who are insecure about the value of our potential contributions to keep their mouths shut, as they can also encourage those of us who compensate -- for ultimately the same fear -- by never shutting them. Besides entrenching ourselves in our weaknesses, and being clearly unfair, the greatest toll in my mind is that group decision-making often skews the work because aggressive and argumentative verbal abilities often fall along class, cultural, and sex lines. At Mariposa we used a simple technique which encouraged equal participation and largely diffused the kinds of frustrations and anxieties caused by arguments, by interrupting one another, etc. We simply set aside a good chunk of time, and went around the circle allowing each member to talk without interruption for as long as they wished. We used this technique in three different ways: 1.) Simply to evaluate and improve our working systems. For example, we would have an evaluation session after each shoot. This would improve our performance for the next one (particularly important if you are not holding to traditional crew assignments and responsibilities), and would also encourage each of us to work cooperatively during the critical and tense time of the actual location work, knowing that if someone made us mad, we could afford to hold our tongues because of this special time reserved for telling them what asses they had been. 2.) Sometimes it was specifically devoted to dealing with the inevitable interpersonal problems and tensions which come up when people work so closely together. In this arena it is very easy to get into some kind of encounter group or therapy,

or perhaps a discussion of someone's personal politics or attitudes, i.e., to get into areas of people's personalities which are not relevant to the work of the group. In order to avoid this, we sometimes would borrow (liberally) from the Chinese, whereby everybody in the group would go around the circle and criticize each other member, and then in turn criticize themselves, but only as concerned each person's working relationship to the group and the task at hand. 3.) But most of our sessions (we called them "Pass the Rattle", again borrowing liberally -- this time from the American Peyote Cult). were devoted to getting actual work done. In other words, if we had a film problem to solve as a group, particularly one which people had strong feelings about, more often than not we would not discuss it in the ordinary way, but rather "Pass the Rattle". For instance, after screening a rough cut we would criticize it using this form of meeting. If we were in a great hurry we would apply a time limit, but usually people could take as long as they liked. (You would be surprised how brief some of us can be when there is no one to argue against). The only rule was that no one could interrupt, the sole exception we made was to ask for a clarification of a point that was not understood. (A technique which with some practice can be much abused).

The process is amazing; everyone gets listened to; if there is anger it usually gets diffused, and disagreements are worked out with a minimum of hassle. Oftentimes, either because there was no consensus reached, or because points were made which individuals wanted to respond to, we would go around again, and on the second round we almost always reached a consensus. The process sounds ungainly, but it really is more efficient than arguments, and certainly more democratic (at least in my experience) than other systems of group procedures such as parliamentary rules.

Making good movies is hard enough, making them in alternative ways is really difficult. The lack of money for our films often requires that we work at survival salaries. This is onerous enough, but especially so when the choice is working in the mainstream industry where the money and power are so great. (\$100 per week for Gay Pride vs \$250 for Yellow Cab could be called a "will of conscience", but as against \$750 for Right Guard borders on martyrdom). Word is Out cost \$250,000, paying everybody \$100 a week (except for the office manager who got \$25 a week extra as a dirty-work-guilt-money bonus). I have calculated that if the movie were made for union scale the cost would have been near a million dollars. So we had the choice of making the film working for a minimum wage, or not making it at all. We also, just like every other large film I have ever worked on, had to put in long, long hours.

I do not think any of us is involved in this kind of filmmaking to get rich, but at the same time we certainly are not interested in making anybody else rich. Therefore there is a real and practical reason (beside the simple ethics involved) for dividing the financial ownership of the project in a genuinely equitable manner. Word is Out is divided in a way which, with some modifications, might serve as a model. The film was made primarily with money from investors. (The reason for this is that no private foundation or Government agency would go near the topic). 100% of the return goes to these investors until their investment is recouped (a fairly standard arrangement). Thereafter they get half and Mariposa gets half. We apportion

our share according to the amount of time an individual member puts into the project. So that if I worked fifty weeks on the project and you worked 100, when the Group gets some money, I will get a dollar for every two you get.

This is the fairest way that I can think of to divide any profits from a film, but there are some problems with it. What do you do with people who worked too little to be able to give them a percentage? (We tried paying them a little more in cash). What to do with people whose actual contribution cannot be fairly measured in time, such as those who appeared in the film, or who contributed extraordinary talents such as consulting, or writing music, etc.? (At Mariposa we chose to make a separate category of these people and gave them, as a group, a token 10% of our share). Another question we never clearly resolved was: Should people's experience -- length of time working in films -- be recognized by giving them somewhat more ownership for the same amount of work-time? I think that it is reasonable that I should get more ownership for a week's work in a film than should a beginner. (Whether, in future films, I will ever have the courage to insist on this remains to be seen). I think some kind of multiplier could be used such as if you have worked in films for 0-5 years your week is multiplied by 1; if you have worked 5-10 years, it is multiplied by 1.5, etc.

Now a lot of this figuring is academic anyway because most documentaries never make money, even one as successful as Word is Out will probably do little more than make back the original investment. It is essential to go through these steps of ownership nonetheless, not only because the film could turn out to be profitable (God forbid) but more importantly, because not doing it can have a serious effect on the spirit of equality and fairness, so important if we are to build a truly alternative cinema in this country.

I would like to add a few miscellaneous words here about working collectively in my experience. They all come under the heading of too much of a good thing. As I have said before, I think one of the biggest pitfalls for us neophytes of collectivity is trying to do everything together. In the first place, I would very much discourage living together. At the end of a fifteen hour day the last face I wanted to go home and see was one or all of the same five. Also, it is hard enough working with someone who, for the moment, you hate because they have a stupid idea for the ending of the movie, but impossible if your anger is compounded by resentment because they did not put the cap back on the toothpaste this morning. In the second place, it might be a good idea if the members of the collective only have to commit themselves to working together on a project by project basis, because the pressures resulting from a goal of permanency can cause their own quick demise. Thirdly, there are always going to be contradictions between who is in the collective and who is not and why. Everybody who worked on the film cannot and, indeed, should not be invited to join the collective. This will result in the inevitable resentments and guilt. But remember that for filmmaking, at least the larger a collective is, the more unwieldy, less efficient, and probably less democratic it becomes. Also, adding new members is always a disruption because it takes time to introduce them into the group, and then to readjust the working relationships between the old members. I am not saying never do it, but do it advisedly.

If the collective from the beginning has very limited goals, definition, and membership, and if it is producing good work, then is the time, should the desire exist, to examine the possibility of living together, or working together forever, or including indefinite numbers of others.

In closing I would like to say that there are two reasons that we must try to find alternative structures (such as collectives) for making movies. The first is that simple authoritarian systems stifle people's growth, are arbitrary, and no fun at all. The second reason is that I think it will affect the aesthetics and the content -- the power -- of the movies themselves. There is nothing sacred about traditional ways of making films, whether it be crew-role assignments (You tell me where to point the camera and I'll turn it on), responsibility for content (You write the script and I'll type it), ownership (You make the movie and I will own it), entrepreneurship (You raise the money and I will spend it), or interpersonal relationships (You be the Mommie and I'll be the Daddy). The old systems obviously work on some levels (Mussolini made the trains run on time), and it is easier to adopt them wholesale or reject them wholesale than to take the risks of trying unproven structures. It is important to remember that the ways of making movies arose as solutions to problems very different from those most of us face -- problems stemming from the capitalist system and early industrial models and primitive equipment. How do you turn a profit from a studio with a large overhead? (Make a movie a week). How do you make a movie a week? (Create an assembly line by sharply defining and limiting roles and responsibilities). How do you keep someone happy who is only allowed to put a very small part of themselves into their work? (Tell them that a lot of other people would love to have their jobs, or, if they have a union, pay them a lot and hope they will be happy with their split-levels and their recreational vehicles. It would, of course, be foolish to abandon these systems wholesale. Wonderful things have come out of hierarchical structures and old experience. (Gone with the Wind is a wonderful movie; The Great Pyramids are wonderful pyramids).

Furthermore, I don't think that making movies collectively is the only, or even the best, way to make them, but I do think that we have to find new ways to work together. Working under more equitable arrangements is difficult; we have not been taught how to work that way and, besides, we are not all equal in the first place: some of us are smarter, some of us have had more experience, some of us are actually more creative, some of us care more, etc. But I think in any structure two things are almost indispensable: one is flexibility and the second is accountability. The one thing we all have in common is that we are all human (although in the middle of the process you may come to question even this assumption), and it is important to each of us that our value be recognized and appreciated, for we have unique and significant contributions to offer the world. And it is O.K., and sometimes even good, to work under someone who has authority over us, but only if that authority is mandated by us and if that person is, therefore, accountable to us. Whatever system or combination of systems we work under, if we can include this accountability to each other in our processes, then our work will show it and, in turn, hopefully encourage it.

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