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WE CAN JUST BE FILMMAKERS

Skip Norman in Conversation with Gerd Conradt

North Cyprus, 2002

Gerd Conradt went to see Skip Norman in North Cyprus in 2002. Their conversation focuses on their friend and fellow student Holger Meins, who, like Conradt and Skip Norman, but also Harun Farocki, Helke Sander or Hartmut Bitomsky, started to study film at Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (dfffb) in September 1966.

Skip Norman: I don't remember seeing Holger when we took the ... or the first meeting with the mayor, Willy Brandt. But I do remember meeting him, because we were in the same group. We were all assigned to Lilienthal after the "Aufnahmeprüfung," after the entrance exam. And we all passed the exam and it was quite an experience. And I remember when we had the group discussions and Lilienthal was trying to get us to think about what we wanted to do, whether or not we wanted to direct, or do the camera, or what other job we might be interested in. I think one of the things that I remember is that Holger basically suggested "We could do everything and anything," you know. We don't have to be directors, or camera people, we can just be filmmakers. And that really impressed me, because I think Lilienthal was trying to get us to understand that filmmaking is a question of the division of labor. And Holger was suggesting that, hey, filmmaking is filmmaking, and the labor is not the key thing. The key thing is what you want to say cinematically. So that's why I've always felt that Holger was my real, my first teacher in terms of filmmaking. And that's another reason why I asked him if he would shoot my first project. Because we all had to do a first film that was to prove that we were sensitive to the filmmaking process, and that we would be a good investment for continuing the education in the academy.

Gerd Conradt: So what has happened while shooting your first film?

SN: Well, it was very interesting. I had some idea about the structure of film, but not much. And I think that I was able to demonstrate that in the "Aufnahmefilm," the Super 8. But I didn't know much about producing, and I had no idea about the film camera. And Holger seemed to have answers for all those things. So I felt that he would be ideal to help me manage this project, to put it together. I had the idea, but I had no experience in putting it together. So he was production manager, "Aufnahmeleiter," and he was also the camera person, and we worked very closely with each other. I would tell him what I thought and what I wanted, and he would suggest how we could do it. There is one shot in the film that was really amazing for me, the way it worked. I wanted to structure a dialog between a man and a woman, and I didn't want to have any cuts in it, but I didn't want us to see this dialog, which was actually not a spoken dialog, but an emotional one. I didn't want us to see this dialog from just one camera position. So Holger suggested that we encircle the actors. And the amazing thing about that shot was that it went from an objective to a subjective perspective, all in one. Because when the camera would encircle the two actors, if on the side of the two actors, when it came to ... in front of the one main actor, it became subjective. So the camera went from objective, subjective, objective, subjective, objective, subjective and it was really great because it sort of made it possible to experience the tension between these two people, as an outsider and an insider, alright? As someone who saw both and as someone who was either the male or the female in the shot. It was great. And I remember some of the colleagues, who had seen the rushes, commenting on the fact that this shot was a tour de force. Holger had rigged up a dolly, he had rigged up the wheels on the dolly so that the shot was smooth. He had choreographed the actors in terms of their movements relative to the camera. So it was a great shot and it was a great learning experience, too, in terms of the kind of discipline, the design, the rehearsal, the working together of all of the components in the process – he knew all that and all of us learned from him in this production how to coordinate these things in film work. So, my first film, which is called *Riffi*, was able to keep me in the film academy for the next two years.

GC: So how does it happen, that Holger became such a political person instead of going on with this creative part of being a cameraman or filmmaker or whatever?

SN: Well, I think part of the reason is that Holger also seemed to be easily influenced and I think he was very much influenced by people who had the ability to express themselves in very clear rational terms. He was sensitive as an artist but he was susceptible also to irrational way of thinking. Clear arguments. Because I remember during the discussions we had in the academy, part of his job, at least it seemed to him to be, was to focus on the clearness of what needed to be said. So he would always make comments to make sure that this is what the person really meant. He had a need for clarity. He had a need for artistic expression but he had a need for clarity, too. Now there were some people in the academy, who

were far better trained at expressing ideologies than others. And most of the ideologies that we were confronted with in the academy were ideologies that came out of the leftist political scene, ideologies that dealt with the Vietnam War, ideologies that dealt with the conflict between labor and capital, ideologies that dealt with the conflict between males, men and women in society, ideologies that dealt with the issues like imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and the Third World. In the second year, these ideologies began to take hold in the academy and at the same time, we would spend a lot of time discussing these issues using substance that at least made us feel like we were really getting some deep understanding about these issues. Similar to the kind of things we learned from artists who talk about when they're writing they have a bottle of whiskey right there and a pack of cigarettes, and whiskey and cigarettes seem to heighten the creative process. Well we also had things that heightened the creative process, at least we thought it did. And so at some point, it was not possible to step back from the politics of the scene if you wanted to be a part of the scene. The only way you could not be a part of the scene is if you stepped back from it. And some people did step back from it. They just decided not to be involved politically and just to do their own thing. But most of us somehow got caught up in it, and some of us got caught up in it more deeply in it than others. And I think Holger got caught up in it in a deep way because he somehow needed this ... I don't know ... he needed to be a part of something that had real meaning and by that time, his artistic sensibilities didn't seem to carry the strength of the real meaning that he needed. And so the politics stepped in. And again, through the influence of the ideologues, together with the substances that helped us to see these things a little clearer, he became more deeply involved.

GC: Was there a last meeting between you and him? Did you get the way that he became a guerrillero or something like that?

SN: No. Actually, the last meeting we had, we smoked and drank together and discussed some political issues. I think, at that time we were talking about the American situation with the Black Panther Party and how the Black Panther Party basically began to work in the community to get the people to understand how the police force was an occupying power and that they had to do something to control the way the police were occupying the communities in the black areas. So we talked about things like that. He wanted to go and continue the discussion with another group of friends, I think, in the "Kommune" somewhere. But I didn't really feel like doing that. And I think that's the last time we talked to each other or met socially, because after that, I didn't see much of him. He seemed to disappear from the scene.

GC: Did he try to make contact with you when he was illegal, in the underground?

SN: No. He never tried to make contact with me, at least not to my knowledge, no.

GC: How was it for you when you saw him on a “Wanted” poster?

SN: I was shocked. But somehow, somewhere deep down inside, I was not that surprised. Because it seemed as if he was headed in that direction. Because he had given up the things that I thought meant something to him: his concern for the art of filmmaking, his ability to translate his ideas through the camera into really sensitive film work, which is obvious in his film *Oskar Langenfeld*. And since he had given up those things, simply by disappearing from the scene and not getting involved in the film projects of others, I was shocked when I saw that but I was also not really surprised.

GC: How was it, seeing your classmate Holger as a dead person, in the big magazine *Stern*, this well-known picture?

SN: I was shocked and very, very angry. I was angry at the way they had taken his dignity. They had stripped him of his dignity as a person in order to demonstrate to people that this was just another one of those ill-defined people who don't understand the real issues. And the sensitivity, the intelligence, the humanity, the respect he had for people, all of that had been taken away from him and he was shown as someone who had been marked by the devil, so to speak, and should also be presented to the world as a person who was marked in such a way. And that made me very, very sad and actually I found it to be very, very hurtful, which is why I made a comment about that picture in the email I sent to you in terms of you using it in the film, but I understand why you needed to use it, because people needed to see how Holger himself had been dehumanized. And most of us who knew him personally knew him as an extremely sensitive human being.

You know, I remember, the first time that we talked to each other, I think I was explaining to maybe Holger and a group of other people that I needed to find another place to live because Utz Kempe didn't have enough space for two people. He let me stay for a couple of nights until I could find a place. And then Holger invited me to stay with him in his apartment in the Hauptstraße. And I think I lived right under the roof in sort of like an attic situation. We were both busy, so we didn't spend much social time with each other, but when we did, he was one of the few people who seemed to be totally relaxed in terms of dealing with a foreigner, especially a black person. There was no real racism in Berlin and in the academy at the time, but there was a kind of standoffishness for people who had not really had any experience with a black person. And with time, of course, that would dissipate, because I would participate in the discussions and people would get to know each other. But from the very beginning,

Holger seemed to relax. He seemed to have had experience outside of his own culture with people from different cultures, and so he always felt comfortable and he always made me feel comfortable, too, interacting with him. And he was always willing to teach me something because I had no idea at the time. I had a lot of theater experience and I had of course watched a lot of films but I had very little film experience. So he, in essence, was my first film teacher, both in terms of working with me on my project and in terms of allowing me to work in some capacity on his projects.

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