



REMEMBERING SKIP NORMAN

A conversation between Shirikiana and Haile Gerima

Haile Gerima: Well, the first time we met him—the first time I met him, was in that every Saturday study group we used to have where we would watch a film and discuss, in the old building at Howard...

Shirikiana Gerima: At Howard, yes.

HG: I don't know how he knew about it, but he came anyway. Intellectually, he was contributing very well and good, talking to faculty there, and to students. He was knowledgeable about film and social change, he came, I think, from Berlin, Germany. At one point, also he had showed us—I don't know when I've seen his film, but I've seen his film. Basically, that's the beginning I would like to point out quickly: It was through intellectual intersection that I met him.

SG: So, the event on Saturdays was a time for watching movies that were produced from around the world. We would watch movies from South Africa, Latin America—students, professors, and community people. It was an opportunity to learn films, indulge in films—filmmaking, film language – for expressing ideas how filmmakers around the world were attacking this thing of cinema as a way of expressing themselves. It was quite enlightening. I was a student, I had just come to Howard.

HG: It was a critical discussion.

SG: A critical discussion in that we would rotate who would be presenting the films. There was some research involved, too, which made sure that you could present the

films. That's when I met Skip, too. He was a teacher at Howard University at that time.

HG: No, he was not. He just came by, from the community, as a community person.

SG: Really? He wasn't teaching when we first met there?

HG: No, no. I think he started teaching when we started shooting the "Wilmington Ten" (*Wilmington 10 – USA 10.000*, dir.: Haile Gerima, USA 1978). Then he was teaching cinematography.

SG: Okay, so he just came on...

HG: He came off the street one Saturday and we met him. He was very enthusiastic, very passionate, and after that, it was teaching at Howard, I don't know if it was on a temporary basis initially, or whatever...

SG: As a lecturer.

HG: Yeah, he was teaching. Then, the next thing is when we went to do the film on the "Wilmington Ten" where he was the cinematographer.

SG: And that was a cooperation, again, between students, professors, and the community to produce a documentary about political prisoners, specifically in Wilmington, North Carolina. He was the first person where, I think, I was able to look through his camera, on that set. That gave me a certain feeling of power, the power of frame, and being able to control that frame. That was pretty amazing—in a motion picture camera; I had done it in stills, but having that sensation in a motion picture film camera was really something else for me. And I think that whole production was an amazing exchange of knowledge and experience, character integrity etc. for everybody who was involved.

HG: What I learned doing the "Wilmington Ten"... One: I don't know if I saw the film he did in Germany or Europe on Bobby Seale and the Black Panther Party. It was very distant. I remember seeing the film, or he had told me about, or he had showed it to us (I don't remember clearly). But I know when I asked him to do the cinematography part of the "Wilmington Ten," it was out of his still photography work that I found

impressive. That's how I knew he would be the one to shoot the film. At the same time, also, he was very friendly to students. I liked that part also. He was not pulling rank on students, he was a friend of students, he was very close to them.

SG: Invested. He was very invested in our development.

HG: Yeah. And he was also very sensitive. If you remember when we were filming Mrs. Wright, in the middle of the shoot, he'd start crying and left the camera. And I said, "damn..."

SG: Because he was so moved by the way she talked about the incarceration of her son.

HG: I think that he'd been away, so the mothers and the fathers of the "Wilmington Ten" really got to him. Initially I got mad, and I had to talk to him when he left the camera crying. But then I considered... Later on, I just said "Damn, it's because this are his folks," and he was maybe flashbacking, I didn't know, he didn't share with me. But I gathered... I think it was you or somebody who jumped in and continued shooting the camera.

SG: It wasn't me.

HG: Who was it? It was not Leila, not Ellen. Pam was not in that shoot. So I don't know who, but somebody jumped and started continuing. Or maybe I did, I don't know. But anyway, I learnt a lot about how sensitive he was, very sensitive. He was really sensitive. Even in that, I felt that he really helped a lot of people on still photography and photography. He helped a lot of the students to get deeper and deeper into the discussion of cinematography. Many moments, at many occasions, I would see him explaining something to the young people. I know how anxious he was to share. He was very, very anxious to share.

SG: Right, he was.

HG: And it is also unfortunate that he didn't continue at Howard, because I thought that he was really a good cinematography teacher, and also, he gave the school a variety in my view in the world of cinematography. I was really trying to find some of his

students that I know could speak more about this. Because I never sat in his classrooms. Have you?

SG: No, I experienced him outside of the classroom just as a teacher, a person who shared knowledge and information, and skill, but not in the class.

HG: But I thought you had some relation with him in terms of still photography?

SG: No, not as a still photography teacher.

HG: Also, I don't know if you were in the building. You know, he came by before he passed. He looked good, he was okay. It was really a shock for me.

SG: Yeah, he came to a community session, a student session.

HG: And he also came to the editing room one day and sat down in my editing room.

SG: Oh, I was talking about Howard. Usually, he came by our building.

HG: After he went to Turkey...

SG: ... Cyprus...

HG: After he went to Cyprus, he kept coming, visiting us every time he came to his family. And then, I know at one point he had introduced me to his sister, but he kept coming to [Sankofa](#), and he was into those organic sandwiches...

SG (chuckles).

HG: That's the other part that I forgot. He was the first headache for me on vegetarianism. He was so obsessed about the anti-carnivorous planet. Throughout every moment that we had when we were travelling to shoot the film in North Carolina, I was always upset with him because he was attacking the very food I like: meat. But he was always drinking this carrot-and-something-juice. Any chance he gets on vegetarianism and health, he gets off! For me, it was a surprise that he had cancer. He was the most careful... I don't even know if he drank?

SG: I don't remember that at all. I never saw him drinking.

HG: For me, he was a nice human being. I think when he left Howard, Howard lost a lot. Because to me, the whole idea of the diversity or the variety he brought to the students, his style, his boundaryless relation with the students: All that was a very important asset he was bringing to the university that I felt they lost when he was let go—or when he left. I know that there was not much effort done to keep him, in the way they should have. The way we do with many people. He should have been really offered more opportunity to stay and to teach, but...

SG: ... we lost out. But I'm glad that he came, I think he influenced a generation of young black students there. And community people, people who are not even enrolled in Howard. I'm glad that we had the benefit of knowing Skip, because that was really... I know I benefitted, and I know you did. I think I speak for so many people who are better people because he came through.

HG: He was a very intellectual friend...

SG: ... and curious. He didn't have these superficial boundaries about what was important to know. He was curious about everything. So that was a pleasure. I'm glad that this tribute is being done, because like you said: If he was at Howard, I don't know if we would have a chance to thank him in the way that he deserves to be thanked. That's why I'm glad that somewhere in the world, people are taking time out to make sure that he gets a proper "Thank you" for his efforts. That's why I'm happy to do this conversation with you, Haile. And I hope that it contributes something to this picture.

HG: You're right.

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