



A STRANGER IN THE VILLAGE

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN GREG DE CUIR JR AND MICHAEL BOYCE GILLESPIE ON SKIP NORMAN

30 August 2021

Greg de Cuir: Skip Norman was a new name for me a year or two ago. I knew a bit about *Blues People* from being in intermittent contact with the Farocki Institut and other random connections in which I discovered this film, but I didn't know anything about Skip Norman. So I want to open our talk—this discussion, this text—with some of your thoughts about first encountering the name Skip Norman and his life and work.

Michael B. Gillespie: Thank you very much for the opportunity to chat with you. The work that you do across the board is inspiring and it's always a pleasure to be in conversation with you. Finding out about Wilbert Reuben Norman Jr, otherwise known as Skip Norman, was a bit shocking. Thinking about his biography, there's an aspect of it that was strikingly familiar in terms of how we might perhaps understand the narrative of the black expatriate experience. At least, that's what I thought his story was but then I discovered he returned to the States, got his degree at Ohio State, and even worked at Howard University with Haile Gerima.

GdC: Yeah.

MG: He's a really interesting figure to me, particularly in terms of how I'm always nose wide open for anything that pushes and challenges the idea of Black film. Most immediately, there's his place in the German Film and Television Academy in the late 1960s that marks him as a very special case to think about his political fabulation of the idea of Black film.

GdC: Yeah. He's got a special life story. He's really unique. I have a special affinity for Skip Norman because I can totally relate and mirror myself in this position of being a Black expat, being in Europe, but also going to film school in Europe and finishing film school in Europe, and then eventually working in Europe. And seeing all these connections, it's fascinating to me. I look at Skip with a great deal of familiarity, but also with nose wide open, eyes wide open, all sensitive faculties wide open to just the amazing things he was doing when he was doing them and who he was doing them with. I mean, in the late 1960s, he's literally walking along the corridor with greats—whether we talk about Farocki himself, the Maestro, or Holger Meins or some of these other people that were really part of this golden generation at the DFFB. So it's really just refreshing for me to see that Skip Norman has his moment now to contribute his story to this golden generation.

MG: Right. The way that Skip talked about Holger Meins—the kind of friendship and their conversations about politics—was quite significant. I'm curious about how he might have processed those conversations in retrospect as Meins moved beyond cinema and ended up with the Red Army Faction. They each were invested in thinking about politics and the possibility of world revolution, but Skip pursued these questions by way of his filmmaking practice. Also, the fact that he's at the Berlin School in 1968 and didn't get expelled with all the other first and second year students is something. I don't know how he dodged that. I find it really incredible the way that this kind of radical thought happened within an institutional context and the consequences of that 1968 expulsion moment. I've also been thinking about something that Skip wrote around 1984 while he attended Ohio State University: "The visual study of society through the study of culture should be seriously considered as an area of film training for future social scientists, ie, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and humanitarians." He's definitely ahead of his time in terms of how he understood himself as an interdisciplinary artist and how we understand visual culture.

GdC: Yeah. And ahead of his time also in terms of anthropology and visual anthropology, and the respect for the moving image or for creative practice as research. That's also really fascinating at this point in time. So that's another amazing turn. The turn to anthropology, and his teaching. And like you said, his interdisciplinary character, it's really fascinating. So just another thought for you that I'm curious to get your take on: The history of film. Where does he fit in? How do we reinsert him into his proper place? Whether we're talking about the history of European film, the history of Black film? It's a broad question and we'll come back to it maybe at the end of the discussion, but I'd love to peek into it for a moment at this kind of preamble.

MG: When I think about the work of Black film and media studies when I started graduate school in 1995

and where the field is today it's clear that the field has changed in necessary ways. The motivation for what Black film and media scholarship was supposed to do in the late 20th century has become more wide ranging as the questions have shifted from what the field *must* do as opposed to what it *can* do regarding more nuanced conceptions of the art of blackness. I say that because I always appreciate new directions in Black film and media studies. I'm very thrilled by the scholarship more attentive towards telling a history of the Black avant-garde. There are pockets of that work being done, but I hope for more volumes of work because it seems to me that every few years we're discovering or rediscovering new figures or there are contemporary figures who are speaking to past figures. I think, as always, we need to be very skeptical of any categorization of Black film that is tethered to a social category of lived experience. Avoiding a more sociological minded categorization of black film gives us more room to really begin thinking about, with a nod to Stuart Hall, what is this black in „Black film.“ I'm thinking here about Edward Owens' body of work as he's making films in New York's underground/avant-garde circles at the same time that Skip is doing work in Berlin. I would love to see how we can begin to write a history of the black avant-garde with regard to film and media that can account for the broad range of work and the alliances that were happening. People are not necessarily speaking to each other, but they're doing collateral work. They're doing work that is adjacent to one another in terms of formal experimentation and political investment.

GdC: In terms of collateral work and this sort of parallelism, this camaraderie of sorts across filmic lines, across national lines: When I think of the time frame and I think of Skip and I think of Europe, I'm thinking of Melvin Van Peebles. This is also somebody that made his way from the US to Europe, learned multiple languages, whether it's French, whether it's Dutch, inserting himself into the landscape, being involved with some really important people at some really important times. And then obviously, somebody that was incredibly politically engaged, and somebody that was very much invested in formal experimentation. It's just fascinating when we talk about the archive. Has the archive lied to us? Has the archive obscured some things? We know that there's an archival politics, and that's one among many reasons that somebody like a Skip Norman can slip through the cracks, I think.

MG: That's so great. Thanks for bringing up Melvin. I was rewatching *La Permission* the other day, which was eventually retitled *The Story of a Three-Day Pass*. It challenges and disrupts the narrative that we have of the French New Wave in generative ways. It's quite easy for people to think about the French New Wave as building up to this moment of May 68 and then dissolving in a sense of disillusionment. But, I see that spirit still thriving not only in *La Permission*, but later in *Watermelon Man* and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* as well. I have a lot of skepticism about the fantasies that are often projected onto the archive because I understand the archive as an ongoing process. I'm not just strictly

going along and kissing the ring of a canonical history. Historiography is still very much in progress and I feel as though one of my responsibilities is to keep the archive thriving by amending it and challenging it at every turn. People like Melvin Van Peebles, Edward Owens and definitely Skip Norman offer a lesson in avoiding the grand theory statements about Black film because there's probably dozens of Skip Normans that will bite you in the ass in the end.

GdC: Yeah. We don't know enough.

MG: We'll never know enough. So let's stop writing as though that we do. Let's write in a way that can allow for the possibility to account for people yet to be known.

BLUES PEOPLE

GdC: That's absolutely right. Coming back to this idea of collateralism and parallelism and people working in tandem or working apart. I mean, I think if we look hard enough and are creative enough—maybe we don't even have to look hard. We can draw some lines of continuity. *Blues People*, 1968, Leroi Jones.

MG: Jesus Christ. I thought I was hallucinating when I first saw that thing. I was like "this is not *The Dutchman* is it." Am I making this shit up? But this *is* the Dutchman, yet a dual adaptation. It's *Blues People* and *The Dutchman* in dialogical play.

GdC: That's crazy. That's a new genre: Dual adaptation.

MG: It's a film which opens with Bessie Smith and is tacitly referencing dialogue from the play and speaking to the extensive study that Leroi Jones does in *Blues People* of the economic, cultural, political, and aesthetic resonances of Black music. The film makes a great conceptual connection to how these issues are very much a part of the animating spirit of the *Dutchman*. I really wish I was a fly on the wall when that film started screening in some of these classrooms. That kind of rawness of seeing something which, by the codes of its day, might easily be dismissed away as pornographic. Yet, there's an expansion of what pornographic means as an act of obscenity. The film, as a deliberate act of obscenity, infers something about anti-blackness and American history as an obscenity greater than full frontal shots.

GdC: Yeah. It's a very corporeal film. You want to say it's shocking in its frankness. But this is also, I think, a moment in general in cinema where morals were coming undone a little bit. We were sort of not in this

pristine environment, whether it be Hollywood or even avantgarde film. So I think by this point in time, people would have been ready for something like this, but still, clearly there's a lot to be just amazed at, in terms of again, this sort of frankness and the way that he deals with sex and talks about sex using sex as material, as visual material and as political material, as racial studies and as fodder for racial studies. *Blues People* just does so much. This film screened at the Oberhausen film festival and as far as I understand from some of the research that we were given there were a lot of debates.

MG: Yeah, as there needed to be.

GdC: But it's such a sure film also. This is a student film, right? This is the film of somebody that knows what he's doing. This is not the film of a "student," quote, unquote. This is a film of a very talented director who's very sure of what he wants to do, of the effect that he wants to get and where he wants to go with this film.

MG: Most definitely, you're absolutely right. You have to be quite assured in your practice to essentially make a film that entails ideas of revolution, black consciousness, and what I'm assuming is simulated sex. Even though you have these visual and ideological triggers at play in relationship to *The Dutchman*, the film is also an indictment of desire and racial fetishism. You're absolutely right, it's quite confident work. I want people to begin to see this film and to think about issues of adaptation and blackness. I myself have been thinking about this short film in relation to Anthony Harvey's 1967 adaptation of *The Dutchman*. I think seeing them together can teach us a lot about understanding what questions of fidelity to the text look like in two different instances. Especially in the case of *Blues People*, it demonstrates a kind of disobedience to the source piece that I find necessary and important.

GdC: He takes it and makes it his own. I think there is a disobedience there. And I think we also have to talk about Skip Norman as the performer, as star, Skip Norman as actor. One of my favorite moments in this film is very early on where he's slapped twice. He's slapped twice across the face.

MG: Yeah, he took that slap.

GdC: I love this look that he throws at her. To me, it's a brilliant moment of acting, of performing in the sense that it's real. That's a real slap. He almost looks shocked, but there's just a sensitivity. There's still that confidence. You feel like he's fully in this role, whether he's shocked, whether he's jarred out of his performance or not, the lines are very blurred in terms of what he's performing and what he isn't. Obviously, he had a relationship with this woman. I forget her name. [Li Antes] It's in some of our

research notes, I lost it, amid a ton of other names. But that look, that accusation, that shock, but also that resignation, that hesitation. There's so much in that look. There's so much in that actual moment.

MG: No, you're absolutely right. And that's where I began to know that I was quite quickly appreciating him as an interdisciplinary artist, because there is the level of performance which builds beyond what we would strictly think of in terms of film acting and shifts to something closer to performance art. It's such a stunning, stunning student film. But as you said, not a student. It also made me really, really hungry to know more about, I suppose, his first film that was lost. What is it, *Riffi* from 1966. There are no surviving copies?

GdC: I think they're still researching or still digging, but I believe there were even two student films before *Blues People*.

MG: Wow. I need to keep track of that. I would love to see the arc of what got him to this place. Because he doesn't make another film like this in terms of the work that's available.

GdC: And then again, coming back to sort of parallels and collaterals when we think of students, when we think of this time frame and we think of *Blues People* as a "student film." I would say the same way we can think that *Killer of Sheep* is a quote unquote "student film." This is somebody else that was really working at the top of their game already as a graduate student. When we talk about Charles Burnett. But yeah, that's another ... Anyway, we could go on and on. I think that *Blues People* deserves much, much, much more attention and engagement for all the reasons that you mentioned.

MG: You're totally right. And I just want to quickly say that you're so right about bringing up Burnett. By extension, we could talk about what happens in a late Sixties, early Seventies film school context where students are thinking about the politics of collectivity as a production practice. Berlin School and the LA Rebellion group at UCLA both created distinctive spaces of study and practice.

CULTURAL NATIONALISM

GdC: Absolutely. I love that: their own place in their own space. You can feel that both personally and socially, aesthetically. So if we talk about this sort of collectivity ... I'm really excited to ask you some questions and get your thoughts on *Cultural Nationalism*.

MG: Sure.

GdC: Here, maybe even more than *Blues People*, I mean for me, this is the film that's missing from the Canon, from the canon of structuralist materialist film. I could certainly say from the canon of avantgarde political film. This feels like a major missing link. I don't know how you feel about it.

MG: Even in terms of appreciating the duration of the shot, I think my first thought was definitely in the context of structuralist film. There's something about this movement. It's a child moving across a frozen lake? Or is it a snow covered field?

GdC: I think it's a snow-covered field.

MG: But to think about that movement, the movement from that space of the figure slowly drawn into focus and the space of Bobby Seale's speech is quite wonderful. As Bobby Seale speaks about Frantz Fanon, I began to spin out thinking about the politics of revolution and movements of decolonization. But that movement is then matched to this kind of accumulation and inertia around the building of revolution. It really affected me in terms of the kind of almost hallucinatory experience of following the voice and following the ideas. Before I knew it, that child was completely in view. That's what really surprised me, because I was so keyed in to following the words and then to be so surprised by the visual.

GdC: Yeah. The boy also surprised me. The first time I watched it, I was so keyed in to the landscape in one track in my mind and then the political speech on the other track in my mind and trying to reconcile those things, and obviously also looking for a break or a jump cut or some sort of trick effect. With this type of film, you almost have the instinct of: Okay, where do I see the seams now that I'm paying such loving attention to the frame and to the image? Where's the seam? Where's the reveal that this is a trick shot, and then I can learn how he put it together. And then the boy just literally appeared out of nowhere. I almost felt like I missed the whole middle of the film, and I was in some sort of trance.

MG [laughing]: Well, you were in a trance of blackness!

GdC: It's really hypnotizing. I love it. I love the confidence and the boldness and the fearlessness toward experimentation. We don't have to harp on the whole student thing, but just the flexibility and the proficiency of his style to make a formally radical film and politically radical film like this. It's proving out the idea that we're not going to talk about radical politics if we're not going to talk about a radical film form.

MG: Exactly. I'm thinking of the available footage of the Black Panther Party from this late Sixties early Seventies period, and how often it might take on an embedded observer vantage. I appreciate that work a lot like Agnes Varda's *Black Panthers* (1968). In the case of *Cultural Nationalism*, the film demonstrates an attempt to fashion a formal structure equivalent to the Black radical thought espoused by Bobby Seale. On those grounds alone, this film is so stunningly valuable. You know me, I'm all about film blackness and *Cultural Nationalism* demands vital attention to understanding the idea of Black film regarding concurrent questions of form and content.

GdC: Yeah. Here, black film is literally white film—with this sort of white expanse of snow and this wide open terrain. And this really stark play with the politics of color. The idea of color and combining colors. Not to be too Barthesian about the situation, but clearly with Skip Norman, there are some punctums that affect me. [laughter] So I talked about them with *Blues People* and for me in *Cultural Nationalism*, it's the boy wiping his nose. It's that subtle direction that Skip Norman, or maybe it was the cameraman—maybe they were the same, I don't know, said: "Hey, wipe your nose." That subtle gesture. And then just that smile, that beautiful smile. It sort of punctures everything else and fractures everything else that you would have built up in terms of your resistance to the film, whether it's resistance to the long shot or resistance to the political speech. That smile is sort of the final crack in the mirror, I think for me.

MG: Yeah. I love that. I love you pointing that out because it introduces an element of pleasure which is so often absent from conversations around cultural nationalism as rendered in film.

GdC: Yeah, I think there was ... I forget who it would be. One of those very famous quotes about revolution and pleasure. I mean, this is a moment when I'm thinking of Dušan Makavejev, of course, and *Mysteries of the Organism*—pleasure in revolution. But I can't place this quote about "If I can't dance at your revolution, don't invite me," or "If there's no pleasure, whether sexual pleasure or intellectual pleasure, if pleasure is not part of the program, then I don't want to be part of this revolution." So revolutionary pleasure, I guess we can also talk about it in this moment, even though pleasure is a very complex idea in Skip Norman's work, I would think; whether it's formal or whether it's conceptual or political.

MG: I think what you just said is what I say to myself every time I read afropessimist film criticism. Is there any room for pleasure or a concentration on form or aesthetics? Must it always be just a reductive one to one relationship of image and life with no space between?

STRANGE FRUIT

GdC: Absolutely. *Strange Fruit*—I guess, to go back to adaptation and text. Those are really some of the classics that he's dealing with, whether it's literature, whether it's music. *Strange Fruit* is also his thesis film.

MG: It's the 1969 thesis film, yeah.

GdC: It's more ambitious. It's more expanded than some of these other works that we're looking at, but there's links, obviously. He's sort of combining things, whether it's Bobby Seale, whether it's the idea of political speech, whether it's the idea of the black screen, the black frame. There's the idea of experimentation, playing around with still frames and still images and these flashes of illumination. So *Strange Fruit* is a very complex sort of experimental documentary. What do you think about the film?

MG: I remember the first time I heard Billy Holiday's *Strange Fruit* and I think every time I hear it, I go back to that first listening and that process of recognizing the true nature of the fruit in those poplar trees. I watched the film a few times in a row and began to feel as though that it almost operates as an annotation of the song by providing a very extensive context for the song. I was amazed by those surveilling tracking shots at the same time that Bobby Seale is talking about "All the pigs who have killed our warriors and all the enemies of black people will be brought to justice at the hands of black people." I initially read those tracking shots as the point of view of the police, but the more that Bobby Seale spoke I began to think about them in terms of the Black Panther pig patrols. So there is this kind of shifting of privilege and authority over looking and surveilling. The assuredness of those black screen moments throughout reminded me of Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas' *Hour of the Furnaces*, a film released the year before *Strange Fruit*. Skip's film harkens to those seminal ideas of third cinema. I found that he was articulating a sense of this critical tradition and its designation of first cinemas (Hollywood) and second cinema as the intellectual art cinema of the bourgeoisie. Third cinema would be that cinema that would dispute the previous two and actually be a practice invested in revolution. You mentioned thinking about language and not to get too caught up in the old school terms of film language. *Strange Fruit* enacts "What does revolution look like?" and also a process of "What does the decolonization of the mind look like?"

GdC: Yeah, it is. I think we're seeing that. And the way shots are structured and assembled. Again, this sort of variation between the long tracking shot. I like this idea of the film as counter surveillance, a counter surveillance cinema. And then just sort of the way he punctuates those moments, as you

mentioned, about the pigs will pay this price for this death. And then right at one of those moments, we see a subtle zoom into a close up of one of those military policemen disarming himself of his weapon belt, which I think is really an interesting detail. And I also think another one, sort of one of these punctums that I'm always drawn to, that sort of fire off my imagination about a film. In one of these long, smooth tracking shots, actually the first one across this military base, we very clearly see him zoom in on the "Have Guns Will Travel" slogan. That's a great moment for me. With Bobby Seale in the background or the foreground, but with these ideas of armed patrols and counter surveillance, demanding and earning respect in a very American way, by the barrel of the gun. This idea of power as making someone else, or making some phenomenon submit to your desires and to your wishes. I guess, here we are again: It's a pleasure and some sort of perverse pleasure. But, yeah, *Strange Fruit*, this is all very *Strange Fruit*. And also just to go back to adaptation: When we think of the song and when we think of the literal metaphor of the *Strange Fruit* or I guess the original, it's always very, very—needless to say—striking to me when we see these famous images, these horrific images of murder and white supremacist glee. But those images are always an opportunity for me to do what I normally do, which is just to scan the faces. Just to try and see what on God's Earth and name are these people thinking, and seeing the murderous smiles, seeing the pointing fingers, seeing the tattoos. I'm fascinated with Baby Hitler's tattoo on his arm. The guy in the center of the frame. I think somebody must have done a study on that, but I've never zoomed in close enough to see it. But it's just another devastating exposition or reminder of what this *Strange Fruit* is.

MG: Most definitely. That's really great, Greg. We've had conversations for centuries about what the fuck being free looks like or by what means. In what ways can we guarantee some kind of measure of freedom for black folks in the United States or in the fucking world? And what *Strange Fruit* reminds me is that we may not know what that looks like. It may not look particularly familiar. Skip Norman has created a film which is a process of articulating the necessity of revolution by way of aesthetic speculation. The film renders Bobby Seale in a riveting way. Skip pushes us to begin to consider what Robin Kelley calls "freedom dreams." I think that *Strange Fruit* is an exercise in freedom dreams.

GdC: These are fascinating things to think about. We touched on it, so I just want to come out and ask you about political film. You know, this is all politics, but what do you think, what are Norman's lasting contributions to this idea of political film? Or as the famous maxim goes by Jean-Luc Godard, making films politically versus making political films? How do you feel about that with Norman?

MG: I feel as though he is yet another reminder that we need to be very vigilant and skeptical of the Black film histories which are provided to us as strictly readymade and absolute. We need to really begin

to anchor ourselves in the generative space of Black film historiography. Residing in this place of historiographic process, the writing of a Black film history, is a ceaseless state of devising. There are amazing people doing the work, and the first person who comes to mind is Allyson Nadia Field at the University of Chicago. The work she has done in the discovery of *Something Good-Negro Kiss* has been amazing as well as her work on considering the consequential effect the discovery of the film has had in our current moment. She is not someone who just sits still with the archive as she's putting pressure on the archive. To me, she is modeling a gesture that we all need to do. To be invested in putting constant pressure on the archive, to help it grow and expand and allow for us to amend it with discoveries such as Skip Norman and the future discoveries.

GdC: Yeah. Well, the archive deserves some critique and it can take some critique.

MG: The archive has been around long enough. It can take a few blows.

GdC: It can take a few blows. But we also have to remember that there's people standing behind the archive, there's institutions and those people who can also take some critique. The archive—it is what it is. We know about the gaps. Sometimes we don't know what we're looking for until we find it. But still, I love this idea that the archive should be challenged. We're way past a point in history where we can sort of just take the archive as a given and what's in it as a given and what we're told is in it as a given. It comes back to this idea that the archive can obfuscate as much as it can clarify or illuminate, so we're the ones that need to be wary, because we're the ones that use the archive and rely on it and hope to supplement it.

MG: Yeah. I feel like a good day for me as a Black film and media scholar is when I am just threading the needle between excitement and skepticism, where I have to always think about what I'm seeing without falling into the trap of recycling deadening reading tendencies that perpetuated limited notions of the black film.

GdC: Yeah, well, look, a good day for me as a film scholar/curator/writer is when I can share space and hold a stage with someone like you. A great friend and a great comrade, somebody that always keeps me sharp, opens my eyes up to different things. Gives me a safe space to test out these ideas and thoughts about these great films and filmmakers that we're so privileged to learn about and study and share that excitement with others. So that's a great day for me.

MG: You're one of the most important film curators in the world to me. I consider you a friend and also

someone who I expect to always be challenged by—in a healthy way of: “What the fuck is Greg doing? What is this film? And where did you find this shit?” The work that you do enriches us all.

GdC: I appreciate it, man. It goes without saying I feel the same about you and your work. And yeah, just an honor and a pleasure to keep on keeping on with you. Looking forward to the next engagement.

[Suggested citation: “A Stranger in the Village. A conversation between Greg de Cuir Jr and Michael Boyce Gillespie on Skip Norman,” *Rosa Mercedes* 03/C (December 2021), www.harun-farocki-institut.org/en/2021/12/13/a-stranger-in-the-village/]